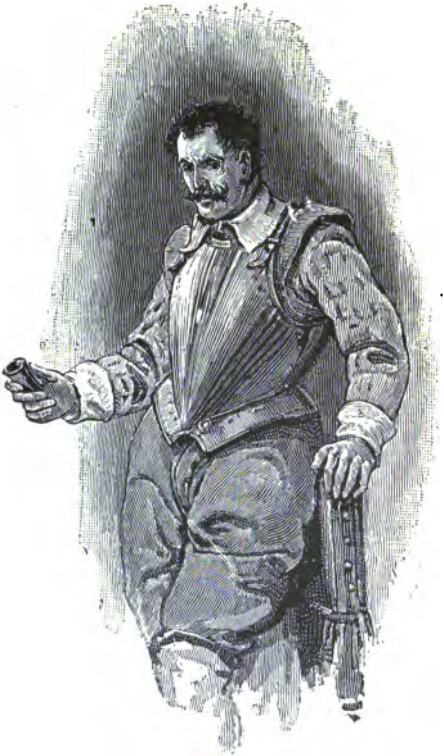
STRATAGEM

Stanley J. Weyman



"HE WAS ALONE WITH HIS TRIUMPH."

THE

KING'S STRATAGEM

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

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THE KING'S STRATAGEM.

IN the days when Henry IV. of France was King of Navarre only, and in that little kingdom of hills and woods which occupies the southwest corner of the larger country, was with difficulty supporting the Huguenot cause against the French court and the Catholic League—in the days when every isolated castle, from the Garonne to the Pyrenees, was a bone of contention between the young king and the crafty queen-mother, Catherine de Medicis, a conference between these notable personages took place in the picturesque town of La Réole.

La Réole still rises gray, time-worn, and half-ruined on a lofty cliff above the broad green waters of the Garonne, forty odd miles from Bordeaux. But it is a small place now. In the days of which we are speaking, however, it was impor

tant, strongly fortified, and guarded by a castle which looked down on a thousand red-tiled roofs, rising in terraces from the river. As the meeting-place of the two sovereigns it was for the time as gay as Paris itself, Catherine having brought with her a bevy of fair maids of honor, in the effect of whose charms she perhaps put as much trust as in her own diplomacy. But the peaceful appearance of the town was delusive, for even while every other house in it rang with music and silvery laughter, each party was ready to fly to arms without warning, if it saw that any advantage was to be gained thereby.

On an evening shortly before the end of the conference two men sat at play in a room, the deep-embrasured window of which looked down from a considerable height upon the river. The hour was late, and the town silent. Outside, the moonlight fell bright and pure on sleeping fields and long, straight lines of poplars. Within the room a silver lamp suspended from the ceiling threw light upon the table, leaving the farther parts of the room in shadow. The walls were hung with

faded tapestry. On the low bedstead in one corner lay a handsome cloak, a sword, and one of the clumsy pistols of the period. Across a chair lay another cloak and sword, and on the window seat, beside a pair of saddlebags, were strewn half a dozen such trifles as soldiers carried from camp to camp—a silver comfit-box, a jeweled dagger, a mask, and velvet cap.

The faces of the players, as they bent over the dice, were in shadow. One—a slight, dark man of middle height, with a weak chin, and a mouth as weak, but shaded by a dark mustache—seemed, from the occasional oaths which he let drop, to be losing heavily. Yet his opponent, a stouter and darker man, with a sword-cut across his left temple, and that swaggering air which has at all times marked the professional soldier, showed no signs of triumph or elation. On the contrary, though he kept silence, or spoke only a formal word or two, there was a gleam of anxiety and suppressed excitement in his eyes, and more than once he looked keenly at his companion, as if to judge of his feelings or learn whether the time had come for some experiment which

he meditated. But for this, an observer looking in through the window would have taken the two for only one more instance of the hawk and pigeon.

At last the younger player threw down the caster, with a groan.

"You have the luck of the Evil One," he said bitterly. "How much is that?"

"Two thousand crowns," replied the other without emotion. "You will play no more?"

"No! I wish to Heaven I had never played at all!" was the answer. As he spoke the loser rose, and going to the window stood looking moodily out.

For a few moments the elder man remained seated, gazing at him furtively, but at length he too rose, and, stepping softly to his companion, touched him on the shoulder. "Your pardon a moment, M. le Vicomte," he said. "Am I right in concluding that the loss of this sum will inconvenience you?"

"A thousand fiends!" exclaimed the young vicomte, turning on him wrathfully. "Is there any man whom the loss of two thousand crowns would not inconvenience? As for me——"

"For you," continued the other, smoothly filling up the pause, "shall I be wrong in saying that it means something like ruin?"

"Well, sir, and if it does?" the young man retorted, drawing himself up haughtily, his cheek a shade paler with passion. "Depend upon it you shall be paid. Do not be afraid of that!"

"Gently, gently, my friend," the winner answered, his patience in strong contrast with the other's violence. "I had no intention of insulting you, believe me. Those who play with the Vicomte de Lanthenon are not wont to doubt his honor. I spoke only in your own interest. It has occurred to me, vicomte, that the matter might be arranged at less cost to yourself."

"How?" was the curt question.

"May I speak freely?" The vicomte shrugged his shoulders, and the other, taking silence for consent, proceeded: "You, vicomte, are Governor of Lusigny for the King of Navarre; I, of Créance, for the King of France. Our towns lie only three leagues apart. Could I, by any chance, say on one of these fine nights,

become master of Lusigny, it would be worth more than two thousand crowns to me. Do you understand?"

"No," the young man answered slowly, "I do not."

"Think over what I have said, then," was the brief answer.

For a full minute there was silence in the room. The vicomte gazed out of the window with knitted brows and compressed lips, while his companion, sitting down, leaned back in his chair, with an air of affected carelessness. Outside, the rattle of arms and hum of voices told that the watch were passing through the street. The church bell struck one. Suddenly the vicomte burst into a hoarse laugh, and, turning, snatched up his cloak and sword. "The trap was very well laid, M. le Capitaine," he said almost jovially; "but I am still sober enough to take care of myself—and of Lusigny. I wish you good-night. You shall have your money, never fear."

"Still, I am afraid it will cost you dearly," the captain answered, as he rose and moved toward the door to open it for his guest. His hand was already on the

latch when he paused. "Look here," he said, "what do you say to this, then? I will stake the two thousand crowns you have lost to me, and another thousand besides against your town. Fool! no one can hear us. If you win, you go off a free man with my thousand. If you lose, you put me in possession one of these fine nights. What do you say to that? A single throw to decide."

The young man's pale face reddened. He turned, and his eyes sought the table and the dice irresolutely. The temptation indeed came at an unfortunate moment, when the excitement of play had given way to depression, and he saw nothing before him outside the door, on which his hand was laid, but the cold reality of ruin. The temptation to return, and by a single throw set himself right with the world was too much for him. Slowly he came back to the table. "Confound you!" he said irritably. "I think you are the devil himself, captain."

"Don't talk child's talk!" said the other coldly, drawing back as his victim advanced. "If you do not like the offer you need not take it."

But the young man's fingers had already closed on the dice. Picking them up he dropped them once, twice, thrice on the table, his eyes gleaming with the play-fever. "If I win?" he said doubtfully.

"You carry away a thousand crowns," answered the captain quietly. "If you lose you contrive to leave one of the gates of Lusigny open for me before next full moon. That is all."

"And what if I lose, and not pay the forfeit?" asked the vicomte, laughing weakly.

"I trust to your honor," said the captain. And, strange as it may seem, he knew his man. The young noble of the day might betray his cause and his trust, but the debt of honor incurred at play was binding on him.

"Well," said the vicomte, "I agree. Who is to throw first?"

"As you will," replied the captain, masking under an appearance of indifference a real excitement which darkened his cheek, and caused the pulse in the old wound on his face to beat furiously.

"Then do you go first," said the vicomte.

"With your permission," assented the captain. And taking the dice up in the caster he shook them with a practiced hand, and dropped them on the board. The throw was seven.

The vicomte took up the caster and, as he tossed the dice into it, glanced at the window. The moonlight shining athwart it fell in silvery sheen on a few feet of the floor. With the light something of the silence and coolness of the night entered also, and appealed to him. For a few seconds he hesitated. He even made as if he would have replaced the box on the table. But the good instinct failed. It was too late, and with a muttered word, which his dry lips refused to articulate, he threw the dice. Seven!

Neither of the men spoke, but the captain rattled the cubes, and again flung them on the table, this time with a slight air of bravado. They rolled one over the other and lay still. Seven again.

The young vicomte's brow was damp, and his face pale and drawn. He forced a quavering laugh, and with an unsteady

hand took his turn. The dice fell far apart, and lay where they fell. Six!

The winner nodded gravely. "The luck is still with me," he said, keeping his eyes on the table that the light of triumph which had suddenly leapt into them might not be seen. "When do you go back to your command, vicomte?"

The unhappy man stood like one stunned, gazing at the two little cubes which had cost him so dearly. "The day after to-morrow," he muttered hoarsely, striving to collect himself.

"Then we shall say the following evening?" asked the captain.

"Very well."

"We quite understand one another," continued the winner, eyeing his man watchfully, and speaking with more urgency. "I may depend on you, M. le Vicomte, I presume?"

"The Lanthenons have never been wanting to their word," the young nobleman answered, stung into sudden haughtiness. "If I live I will put Lusigny into your hands, M. le Captaine. Afterward I will do my best to recover it—in another way."

"I shall be entirely at your disposal," replied the captain, bowing lightly. And in a moment he was alone—alone with his triumph, his ambition, his hopes for the future—alone with the greatness to which his capture of Lusigny was to be the first step, and which he should enjoy not a whit the less because as yet fortune had dealt out to him more blows than caresses, and he was still at forty, after a score of years of roughest service, the governor of a paltry country town.

Meanwhile, in the darkness of the narrow streets the vicomte was making his way to his lodgings in a state of despair and unhappiness most difficult to describe. Chilled, sobered, and affrighted he looked back and saw how he had thrown for all and lost all, how he had saved the dregs of his fortune at the expense of his loyalty, how he had seen a way of escape and lost it forever! No wonder that as he trudged alone through the mud and darkness of the sleeping town his breath came quickly and his chest heaved, and he looked from side to side as a hunted animal might, uttering

great sighs. Ah, if he could only have retraced the last three hours!

Worn out and exhausted, he entered his lodging, and, securing the door behind him, stumbled up the stone stairs and entered his room. The impulse to confide his misfortunes to someone was so strong upon him that he was glad to see a dark form half sitting, half lying in a chair before the dying embers of a wood fire. In those days a man's natural confidant was his valet, the follower, half-friend, half-servant, who had been born on his estate, who lay on a pallet at the foot of his bed, who carried his *billets-doux* and held his cloak at the duello, who rode near his stirrup in fight and nursed him in illness, who not seldom advised him in the choice of a wife, and lied in support of his suit.

The young vicomte flung his cloak over a chair. "Get up, you rascal!" he cried impatiently. "You pig, you dog!" he continued, with increasing anger. "Sleeping there as though your master were not ruined by that scoundrel of a Breton! Bah!" he added, gazing bitterly at his follower, "you are of the *canaille*,

and have neither honor to lose nor a town to betray!"

The sleeping man moved in his chair and half turned. The vicomte, his patience exhausted, snatched the bonnet from his head, and threw it on the ground. "Will you listen?" he said. "Or go, if you choose look for another master. I am ruined! Do you hear? Ruined, Gil! I have lost all—money, land, Lusigny itself, at the dice!"

The man, aroused at last, stooped with a lazy movement, and picking up his hat dusted it with his hand, and rose with a yawn to his feet.

"I am afraid, vicomte," he said, his tones, quiet as they were, sounding like thunder in the vicomte's astonished and bewildered ears, "I am afraid that if you have lost Lusigny, you have lost something which was not yours to lose!"

As he spoke he struck the embers with his foot, and the fire, blazing up, shone on his face. The vicomte saw, with unutterable confusion and dismay, that the man before him was not Gil at all, but the last person in the world to whom he should have betrayed himself. The

astute smiling eyes, the aquiline nose, the high forehead, and projecting chin, which the short beard and mustache scarcely concealed, were only too well known to him. He stepped back with a cry of horror. "Sire!" he said, and then his tongue failed him. He stood silent, pale, convicted, his chin on his breast. The man to whom he had confessed his treachery was the master whom he had conspired to betray.

"I had suspected something of this," Henry of Navarre continued, after a pause, a tinge of irony in his tone. "Rosny told me that that old fox, the Captain of Créance, was affecting your company a good deal, M. le Vicomte, and I find that, as usual, his suspicions were well founded. What with a gentleman who shall be nameless, who has bartered a ford and a castle for the favor of Mlle. de Luynes, and yourself, I am blest with some faithful followers! For shame!" he continued, seating himself with dignity, "have you nothing to say for yourself?"

The young noble stood with his head bowed, his face white. This was ruin,

indeed, absolutely irremediable. "Sire," he said at last, "your Majesty has a right to my life, not to my honor."

"Your honor!" quoth Henry, biting contempt in his tone.

The young man started, and for a second his cheek flamed under the well-deserved reproach; but he recovered himself. "My debt to your Majesty," he said, "I am willing to pay."

"Since pay you must," Henry muttered softly.

"But I claim to pay also my debt to the Captain of Créance."

"Oh," the king answered. "So you would have me take your worthless life, and give up Lusigny?"

"I am in your hands, sire."

"Pish, sir!" Henry replied in angry astonishment. "You talk like a child. Such an offer, M. de Lanthenon, is folly, and you know it. Now listen to me. It was lucky for you that I came in to-night, intending to question you. Your madness is known to me only, and I am willing to overlook it. Do you hear? Cheer up, therefore, and be a man. You are young; I forgive you. This shall be be-

tween you and me only," the young prince continued, his eyes softening as the other's head drooped, "and you need think no more of it until the day when I shall say to you, 'Now, M. de Lanthenon, for France and for Henry, strike!'"

He rose as the last word passed his lips, and held out his hand. The vicomte fell on one knee, and kissed it reverently, then sprang to his feet again. "Sire," he said, standing erect, his eyes shining, "you have punished me heavily, more heavily than was needful. There is only one way in which I can show my gratitude, and that is by ridding you of a servant who can never again look your enemies in the face."

"What new folly is this?" said Henry sternly. "Do you not understand that I have forgiven you?"

"Therefore I cannot give up Lusigny, and I must acquit myself of my debt to the Captain of Créance in the only way which remains," replied the young man, firmly. "Death is not so hard that I would not meet it twice over rather than again betray my trust."

"This is midsummer madness!" said the king hotly.

"Possibly," replied the vicomte, without emotion; "yet of a kind to which your Majesty is not altogether a stranger."

The words appealed strongly to that love of the chivalrous which formed part of the king's nature, and was one cause alike of his weakness and his strength, which in its more extravagant flights gave opportunity after opportunity to his enemies, in its nobler and saner expressions won victories which all his astuteness and diplomacy could not have compassed. He stood looking with half-hidden admiration at the man whom two minutes before he had despised.

"I think you are in jest," he said presently.

"No, sire," the young man answered gravely. "In my country they have a proverb about us. 'The Lanthenons,' say they, 'have ever been bad players, but good payers.' I will not be the first to be worse than my name!"

He spoke with so quiet a determination that the king was staggered, and for a

minute or two paced the room in silence, inwardly reviling the generous obstinacy of his weak-kneed supporter, yet unable to withhold his admiration from it. At length he stopped, with a low, abrupt exclamation.

"Wait!" he cried. "I have it! *Ventre Saint Gris*, man, I have it!" His eyes sparkled, and, with a gentle laugh, he hit the table a sounding blow. "Ha! ha! I have it!" he repeated joyously.

The young noble gazed at him in surprise, half sullen, half incredulous. But when Henry, in low, rapid tones, had expounded his plan, the vicomte's face underwent a change. Hope and life sprang into it. The blood flew to his cheeks. His whole aspect softened. In a moment he was on his knee, mumbling the king's hand, his eyes full of joy and gratitude. After that the two talked long, the murmur of their voices broken more than once by the ripple of low laughter. When they at length separated, and Henry, his face hidden by the folds of his cloak, had stolen away to his lodgings, where, no doubt, more than one watcher was awaiting him with a mind

full of anxious fears, the vicomte threw open his window and looked out on the night. The moon had set, but the stars still shone peacefully in the dark canopy above. He remembered on a sudden, his throat choking with silent repressed emotion, that he was looking toward his home—the stiff gray pile among the beech woods of Navarre which had been in his family since the days of St. Louis, and which he had so lightly risked. And he registered a vow in his heart that of all Henry's servants he would henceforth be the most faithful.

Meanwhile the Captain of Créance was enjoying the sweets of coming triumph. He did not look out into the night, it is true, but pacing up and down the room he planned and calculated, considering how he might make the most of his success. He was still comparatively young. He had years of strength before him. He would rise. He would not easily be satisfied. The times were troubled, opportunities many, fools many; bold men with brains and hands few.

At the same time he knew that he could be sure of nothing until Lusigny was

actually his, and he spent the next few days in considerable suspense. But no hitch occurred. The vicomte made the necessary communications to him; and men in his own pay informed him of dispositions ordered by the governor of Lusigny which left him in no doubt that the loser intended to pay his debt.

It was, therefore, with a heart already gay with anticipation that the Captain rode out of Créance two hours before midnight on an evening eight days later. The night was dark, but he knew the road well. He had with him a powerful force, composed in part of thirty of his own garrison, bold, hardy fellows, and in part of six score horsemen, lent him by the governor of Montauban. As the vicomte had undertaken to withdraw, under some pretense or other, one-half of his command, and to have one of the gates opened by a trusty hand, the captain trotted along in excellent spirits, and stopped to scan with approval the dark line of his troopers as they plodded past him, the jingle of their swords and corselets ringing sweet music in his ears. He looked for an easy victory; but it was not any slight misad-

venture that would rob him of his prey. As his company wound on by the river-side, their accouterments reflected in the stream, or passed into the black shadow of the olive grove which stands a mile to the east of Lusigny, he felt little doubt of the success of his enterprise.

Treachery apart, that is; and of treachery there was no sign. The troopers had scarcely halted under the last clump of trees before a figure detached itself from one of the largest trunks, and advanced to their leader's rein. The captain saw with surprise that it was the vicomte himself. For a second he thought something had gone wrong, but the young noble's first words reassured him. "It is all right," M. de Lanthenon whispered, as the captain bent down to him. "I have kept my word, and I think that there will be no resistance. The planks for crossing the moat lie opposite the gate. Knock thrice at the latter, and it will be opened. There are not fifty armed men in the place."

"Good!" the captain answered, in the same cautious tone. "But you——"

"I am believed to be elsewhere, and

must be gone. I have far to ride to-night. Farewell."

"Till we meet again," the captain answered; and with that his ally glided away and was lost in the darkness. A cautious word set the troop again in motion, and a very few minutes saw them standing on the edge of the moat, the outline of the gateway tower looming above them, a shade darker than the wrack of clouds which overhead raced silently across the sky. A moment of suspense, while one and another shivered —for there is that in a night attack which touches the nerves of the stoutest—and the planks were found, and as quietly as possible laid across the moat. This was so successfully done that it evoked no challenge, and the captain crossing quickly with some picked men stood almost in the twinkling of an eye under the shadow of the gateway. Still no sound was heard save the hurried breathing of those at his elbow or the stealthy tread of others crossing. Cautiously he knocked three times and waited. The third rap had scarcely sounded, however, before the gate rolled silently

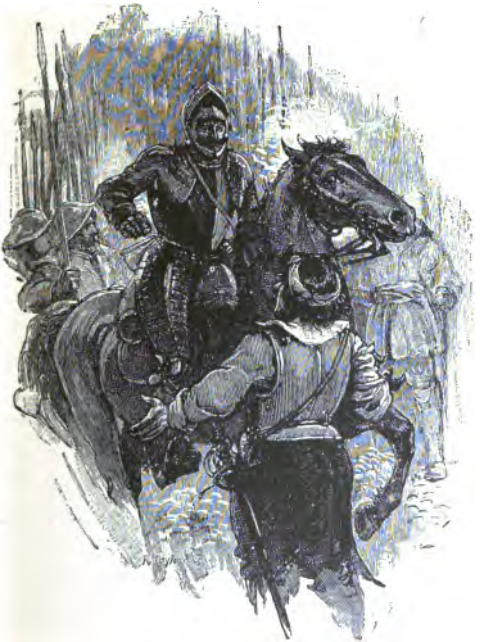
open, and he sprang in, followed by his men.

So far so good. A glance at the empty street and the porter's pale face told him at once that the vicomte had kept his word. But he was too old a soldier to take anything for granted, and forming up his men as quickly as they entered, he allowed no one to advance until all were inside, and then, his trumpet sounding a wild note of defiance, his force sprang forward in two compact bodies and in a moment the town awoke to find itself in the hands of the enemy.

As the vicomte had promised, there was no resistance. In the small keep a score of men did indeed run to arms, but only to lay them down without striking a blow when they became aware of the force opposed to them. Their leader, sullenly acquiescing, gave up his sword and the keys of the town to the victorious captain, who, as he sat his horse in the middle of the market-place, giving his orders and sending off riders with the news, already saw himself in fancy governor of a province and Knight of the Holy Ghost.

As the red light of the torches fell on steel caps and polished hauberks, on the serried ranks of pikemen, and the circle of white-faced townsmen, the picturesque old square looked doubly picturesque. Every five minutes, with a clatter of iron on the rough pavement and a shower of sparks, a horseman sprang away to tell the news at Montauban or Cahors; and every time that this occurred, the captain, astride on his charger, felt a new sense of power and triumph.

Suddenly the low murmur of voices was broken by a new sound, the hurried clang of hoofs, not departing but arriving. There was something in the noise which made the captain prick his ears, and secured for the messenger a speedy passage through the crowd. Even at the last the man did not spare his horse, but spurring to the captain's side, then and then only sprang to the ground. His face was pale, his eyes were bloodshot. His right arm was bound up in blood-stained cloths. With an oath of amazement, the captain recognized the officer whom he had left in charge of Créance and thundered out, "What is it?"



"THEY HAVE GOT CRÉANCE!"

"They have got Créance!" the man gasped, reeling as he spoke. "They have got Créance!"

"Who?" the captain shrieked, his face purple with rage.

"The little man of Béarn! He assaulted it five hundred strong an hour after you left, and had the gate down before we could fire a dozen shots. We did what we could, but we were but one to seven. I swear, captain, we did all we could. Look at this!"

Almost black in the face, the captain swore another frightful oath. It was not only that he saw governorship and honors vanish like will-o'-the-wisps, but that he saw even more quickly that he had made himself the laughing-stock of a kingdom! And he had. To this day among the stories which the southern French love to tell of the prowess and astuteness of the great Henry, there is none more frequently told, or more frequently laughed over, than that of the famous exchange of Créance for Lusigny.

THE BODY-BIRDS OF COURT.

 IGHTY-EIGHT when he died! That is a great age," I said.

"Yes indeed. But he was a very clever man, was Robert Evans, Court, and brewed good beer," my companion answered. "His home-brewed was known, I am certain, for more than ten miles. You will have heard of his body-birds, sir?"

"His body-birds?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, to be sure. Robert Evans Court's body-birds!" And he looked at me, quick to suspect that his English was deficient. He had learned it in part from books; and hence the curious mixture I presently noted of Welsh idioms and formal English phrases. It was his light trap in which I was being helped on my journey, and his genial chat which was lightening that journey; which lay

through a part of Carnarvonshire usually traversed only by wool merchants and cattle dealers—a country of upland farms swept by the sea breezes, where English is not spoken even now by one person in a hundred, and even at inns and post-offices you get only "*Dim Sassenach*," for your answer. "Do you not say," he went on, "body-birds in English? Oh, but to be sure, it is in the Bible!" with a sudden recovery of his self-esteem.

"To be sure!" I replied hurriedly. "Of course it is! But as to Mr. Robert Evans, cannot you tell me the story?"

"I'll be bound there is no man in North or South Wales, or Carnarvonshire, that could tell it better, for Gwen Madoc, of whom you shall hear presently, was aunt to me. You see Robert Evans"—and my friend settled himself in his seat and prepared to go slowly up the long, steep hill of Rhiw which rose before us—"Robert Evans lived in an old house called Court, near the sea, very windy and lonesome. He was a warm man. He had Court from his father, and he had mortgages, and as many as four lawsuits. But he was unlucky in his family. He had years

back three sons who helped on the farm, or at times fished; for there is a cove at Court, and good boats. Of these sons only one was married—to a Scotchwoman from Bristol, I have heard, who had had a husband before, a merchant captain, and she brought with her to Court a daughter, Peggy, ready-made as we say. Well, of those three fine men, there was not one left in a year. They were out fishing in a boat together, and Evan—that was the married one—was steering as they came into the cove on a spring tide running very high with a south wind. He steered a little to one side—not more than six inches, upon my honor—and pah! in an hour their bodies were thrown up on Robert Evans' land just like bits of seaweed. But that was not all. Evan's wife was on the beach at the time, so near she could have thrown a stone into the boat. They do say that before she was pining away at Court—it was bleak and lonesome and cold, in the winters, and she had been used to live in the towns. But, however, she never held up her head after Evan was drowned. She took to her bed, and died in the short

month. And then of all at Court there were left only Robert Evans and the child Peggy."

"How old was she then?" I asked. He had paused, and was looking thoughtfully before, as striving, it would seem, to make the situation quite clear to himself.

"She was twelve, and the old man eighty and more. She was in no way related to him, you will remember, but he had her stop, and let her want for nothing that did not cost money. He was very careful of money, as was right. It was that made him the man he was. But there were some who would have given money to be rid of her. Year in and year out they never let the old man rest but that he should send her to service at least—though her father had been the captain of a big ship; and if Robert Evans had not been a stiff man of his years, they would have had their will."

"But who——"

By a gesture he stopped the words on my lips as there rose mysteriously out of the silence about us a sound of wings, a chorus of shrill cries. A hundred white forms swept overhead, and fell a white

cluster about something in a distant field. They were sea gulls. "Just those same!" he said proudly, jerking his whip in their direction—"body-birds. When the news that Robert Evans' sons were drowned got about, there was a pretty uprising in Carnarvonshire. There seemed to be Evanses where there had never been Evanses before. As many as twenty walked in the funeral, and you may be sure that afterward they did not leave the old man to himself. The Llewellyn Evanses were foremost. They had had a lawsuit with Court, but made it up now. Besides there were Mr. and Mrs. Evan Bevan, and the three Evanses of Nant, and Owen Evans, and the Evanses of Sarn, and many more, who were all forward to visit Court and be friendly with old Gwen Madoc, Robert's housekeeper. I am told they could look black at one another, but in this they were all in one tale, that the foreign child should be sent away; and at times one and another would give her a rough word."

"She must have had a bad time," I observed.

"You may say that. But she stayed,

and it was wonderful how strong and handsome she grew up, where her mother had just pined away. The sailors said it was her love of the sea; and I have heard that people who live inland about here come to think of nothing but the land—it is certain that they are good at a bargain—while the fishermen who live with a great space before them are finer men, I have heard, in their minds as well as their bodies; and Peggy *bach* grew up like them, free and open and upstanding, though she lived inland. When she was in trouble she would run down to the sea, where the salt spray washed away her tears and the wind blew her hair, that was of the color of seaweed, into a tangle. She was never so happy as when she was climbing the rocks among the sea gulls, or else sitting with her books at the cove where the farm people would not go for fear of hearing the church bells that bring bad luck. Books? Oh, yes, indeed! next to the sea she was fond of books. There were many volumes, I have been told, that were her mother's; then Robert Evans, though he was a Wesleyan, went to church because there was no Wesleyan chapel,

the Calvinistic Methodists being in strength about here; and the minister lent her many English books and befriended her. And I have heard that once, when the Llewellyn Evanses had been about the girl, he spoke to them so that they were afraid to drive down Rhiw hill that night, but led the horse; and I think it may be true, for they were Calvinists. Still, he was a good man, and I know that many Calvinists walked in his funeral."

"*Requiescat in pace*," said I.

"Eh! Well, I don't know how that may be," he replied, "but you must understand that all this time the Llewellyn Evanses, and the Evanses of Nant, and the others would be over at Court once or twice a week, so that all the neighborhood called them Robert Evans' body-birds; and when they were there Peggy McNeill would be having an ill time, since even the old man would be hard to her; and more so as he grew older. But, however, there was a better time coming, or so it seemed at first, the beginning of which was through Peter Rees' lobster pots. He was a great friend of hers. She

would go out with him to take up his pots—oh! it might be two or three times a week. So it happened one day, when they had pushed off from the beach, and Peggy was steering, that old Rees stopped rowing on a sudden.

"'Why don't you go on, Peter?' said Peggy.

"'Bide a bit,' said old Rees.

"'What have you forgotten?' said she, looking about in the bottom of the boat. For she knew what he used very well.

"'Nought,' said he. But all the same he began to put the boat about in a stupid fashion, afraid of offending her, and yet loath to lose a shilling. And so, when Peggy looked up, what should she see but a gentleman—whom Rees had perceived, you will understand—stepping into the boat, and Peter Rees not daring to look her in the face because he knew well that she would never go out with strangers.

"Of course the young gentleman thought no harm, but said gayly, 'Thank you! I am just in time.' And what should he do, but go aft and sit down on the seat by her, and begin to talk to Rees

about the weather and the pots. And presently he said to her, 'I suppose you are used to steering, my girl?'

"'Yes,' said Peggy, but very grave and quiet-like, so that if he had not determined that she was old Rees' daughter he would have taken notice of it. But she was wearing a short frock that she used for the fishing, and was wet with getting into the boat, moreover.

"'Will you please to hold my hat a minute,' he said, and with that he put it in her lap while he looked for a piece of string with which to fasten it to his button. Well, she said nothing, but her cheeks were scarlet, and by and by, when he had called her 'my girl' two or three times more—not roughly, but just off-hand, taking her for a fisher-girl—Peter Rees could stand it no longer, shilling or no shilling.

"'You mustn't speak that fashion to her, master,' he said gruffly.

"'What?' said the gentleman, looking up. He was surprised, and no wonder, at the tone of the man.

"'You mustn't speak like that to Miss McNeill, Court,' repeated old Rees more

roughly than before. 'You are to understand she is not a common girl, but like yourself.'

"The young gentleman turned and looked at her just once, short and sharp, and I am told that his face was as red as hers when their eyes met. 'I beg Miss McNeill's pardon—humbly,' he said, taking off his hat grandly, yet as if he meant it too; 'I was under a great misapprehension.'

"After that you may believe they did not enjoy the row much. There was scarcely a word said by anyone until they came ashore again. The visitor, to the great joy of Peter, who was looking for a sixpence, gave him half a crown; and then walked away with the young lady, side by side with her, but very stiff and silent. However, just as they were parting, Peter could see that he said something, having his hat in his hand the while, and that Miss Peggy, after standing and listening, bowed as grand as might be. Upon which they separated for that time.

"But two things came of this: first, that everyone began to call her Miss McNeill, Court, which was not at all to the pleas-

ure of the Llewellyn Evanses. And then that, whenever the gentleman, who was a painter lodging at Mrs. Campbell's of the shop, would meet her, he would stop and say a few words, and more as the time went on. Presently there came some wet weather; and Mrs. Campbell borrowed for his use books from her, which had her name within; and later he sent for a box of books from London, and then the lending was on the other side. So it was not long before people began to see how things were, and to smile when the gentleman treated old Robert Evans at the Newydd Inn. The fishermen, when he was out with them, would tack so that he might see the smoke of Court over the cliffs; and there was no more Peggy *bach* to be met, either rowing with Peter Rees or running wild among the rocks, but a very sedate young lady who yet did not seem to be unhappy.

"The old man was ailing in his limbs at this time, but his mind was as clear as ever, and his grip of the land as tight. He could not bear, now that his sons were dead, that anyone should come after him. I am thinking that he would be

"YOU HAVE BEEN COURTING."

taking everyone for a body-bird. Still the family were forward with presents and such like, and helped him perhaps about the farm; so that though there was talk in the village, no one could say what will he would make.

"However, one day toward winter Miss Peggy came in late from a walk, and found the old man very cross. 'Where have you been?' he cried angrily. Then without any warning, 'You have been courting,' he said, 'with that fine gentleman from the shop?'

"'Well,' my lady replied, putting a brave face upon it, as was her way, 'and what then, grandfather? I am not ashamed of it.'

"'You ought to be!' he cried, banging his stick upon the floor. 'Do you think that he will marry you?'

"'Yes, I do,' she replied stoutly. 'He has told you so to-day, I know.'

"Robert Evans laughed, but his laugh was not a pleasant one. 'You are right,' he said. 'He has told me. He was very forward to tell me. He thought I was going to leave you my money. But I am not! Mind you that, my girl.'

"'Very well,' she answered, white and red by turns.

"'You will remember that you are no relation of mine!' he went on viciously, for he had grown very crabbed of late. 'And I am not going to leave you money. He is after my money. He is nothing but a fortune-catcher!'

"'He is not!' she exclaimed, as hot as fire, and began to put on her hat again.

"'Very well! We shall see!' answered Robert Evans. 'Do you tell him what I say, and see if he will marry you. Go! Go now, girl, and you need not come back! You will get nothing by staying here!' he cried, for what with his jealousy and the mention of money he was furious —'not a penny! You had better be off at once!'

"She did not answer for a minute or so, but she seemed to change her mind about going, for she laid down her hat, and went about the house place getting tea ready— and no doubt her fingers trembled a little —until the old man cried, 'Well, why don't you go? You will get nothing by staying.'

"'I shall stay to take care of you all

the same,' she answered quietly. 'You need not leave me anything, and then—and then I shall know whether you are right.'

"'Do you mean it?' asked he sharply, after looking at her in silence for a moment.

"'Yes,' said she.

"'Then it's a bargain!' cried Robert Evans—'it's a bargain!' And he said not a word more about it, but took his tea from her and talked of the Llewellyn Evanses, who had been to pay him a visit that day. It seemed, however, as if the matter had upset him, for he had to be helped to bed, and complained a good deal, neither of which things were usual with him.

"Well, it is not unlikely that the young lady promised herself to tell her lover all about it next day, and looked to hear many times over from his own lips that it was not her money he wanted. But this was not to be, for early the next morning Gwen Madoc was at her door.

"'You are to get up, miss,' she said. 'The master wants you to go to London by the first train.'

"'To London!' cried Peggy, very much astonished. 'Is he ill? Is anything the matter, Gwen?'

"'No,' answered the old woman very short. 'It is just that.'

"And when the girl, having dressed hastily, came down to Robert Evans' room, she found that this was pretty nearly all she was to learn. 'You will go to Mrs. Richard Evans, who lives at Islington,' he said, as if he had been thinking about it all night. 'She is my second cousin, and will find house room for you, and make no charge. A telegram shall be sent to her this morning. To-morrow you will take this packet to the address upon it, and the next day a packet will be returned to you, which you will bring back to me. I am not well to-day, and I want to have the matter settled and off my mind, Peggy.'

"'But could not someone else go, if you are not well?' she objected, 'and I will stop and take care of you.'

"He grew very angry at that. 'Do as you are bidden, girl,' he said. 'I shall see the doctor to-day, and for the rest, Gwen can do for me. I am well enough.

Do you look to the papers. Richard Evans owes me money, and will make no charge for your living.'

"So Miss Peggy had her breakfast, and in a wonderfully short time, as it seemed to her, was on the way to London, with plenty of leisure on her hands for thinking—very likely for doubting and fearing as well. She had not seen her sweetheart, that was one thing. She had been dispatched in a hurry, that was another. And then, to be sure, the big town was strange to her.

"However, nothing happened there, I may tell you. But on the third morning she received a short note from Gwen Madoc, and suddenly rose from breakfast with Mrs. Richard, her face very white. There was news in the letter—news of which all the neighborhood for miles round Court was by that time full. Robert Evans, if you will believe it, was dead. After ailing for a few hours he had died, with only Gwen Madoc to smooth his pillow.

"It was late when she reached the nearest station to Court on her way back, and found a pony trap waiting for her.

She was stepping into it when Mr. Griffith Hughes, the lawyer, saw her, and came up to speak.

"'I am sorry to have bad news for you, Miss McNeill,' he said in a low voice, for he was a kind man, and what with the shock and the long journey she was looking very pale.

"'Oh, yes!' she answered, with a sort of weary surprise; 'I know it already. That is why I am come home—to Court, I mean.'

"He saw that she was thinking only of Robert Evans' death, which was not what was in his mind. 'It is about the will,' he said in a whisper, though he need not have been so careful, for everyone in the neighborhood had learned all about it from Gwen Madoc. 'It is a cruel will. I would not have made it for him, my dear. He has left Court to the Llewellyn Evanses, and the money between the Evanses of Nant and the Evan Bevans.'

"'It is quite right,' she answered, so calmly that he stared. 'My grandfather explained it to me. I fully understood that I was not to be in the will.'

"Mr. Hughes looked more and more

puzzled. 'Oh, but,' he replied, 'it is not so bad as that. Your name is in the will. He has laid it upon those who get the land and money to provide for you—to settle a proper income upon you. And you may depend upon me for doing my best to have his wishes carried out, my dear.'

"The young lady turned very red, and raised her eyes sharply.

"'Who are to provide for me?' she asked.

"'The three families who divide the estate,' he said.

"'And are they obliged to do so?'

"'Well—no,' said he unwillingly. 'I am not sure that they are exactly obliged. But no doubt——'

"'I doubt very much,' she answered, taking him up with a smile. And then she shook hands with him and drove away, leaving him wondering at her courage.

"Well, you may suppose it was a dreary house to which she came home. Mr. Griffith Hughes, who was executor, had been before the Llewellyn Evanses in taking possession, so that, besides a lad or

two in the kitchen, there were only Gwen Madoc and the servant there, and they seemed to have very little to tell her about the death. When she had heard what they had to say, and they were all on their way to bed, 'Gwen,' she said softly, 'I think I should like to see him.'

"'So you shall, to-morrow, honey,' answered the old woman. 'But do you know, *bach*, that he has left you nothing?' and she held up her candle suddenly, so as to throw the light on the girl's tired face.

"'Oh!' she answered, with a shudder, 'how can you talk about that now?' But presently she had another question ready. 'Have you seen Mr. Venmore since—since my grandfather's death, Gwen?' she asked timidly.

"'Yes, indeed, *bach*,' answered the housekeeper. 'I met him at the door of the shop this morning. I told him where you were, and that you would be back to-night. And about the will, moreover.'

"The girl stopped at her own door and snuffed her candle. Gwen Madoc went slowly up the next flight, groaning over the steepness of the stairs. Then she

turned to say good-night. The girl was at her side again, her eyes shining in the light of the two candles.

"'Oh, Gwen,' she whispered breathlessly, 'didn't he say anything?'

"'Not a word, *bach*,' answered the old woman, stroking her hair tenderly. 'He just went into the house in a hurry.'

"Miss Peggy went into her room much in the same way. No doubt she would be telling herself a great many times over before she slept that he would come and see her in the morning; and in the morning she would be saying, 'He will come in the afternoon;' and in the afternoon, 'He will come in the evening.' But evening came, and darkness, and still he did not appear. Then she could endure it no longer. She let herself out of the front door, which there was no one now to use but herself, and with a shawl over her head ran all the way down to the shop. There was no light in his window upstairs: but at the back door stood Mrs. Campbell, looking after someone who had just left her.

"The girl came, strangely shrinking at the last moment, into the ring of light

about the door. 'Why, Miss McNeill!' cried the other, starting visibly at sight of her. 'Is it you, honey? And are you alone?'

"'Yes; and I cannot stop. But oh, Mrs. Campbell, where is Mr. Venmore?'

"'I know no more than yourself, my dear,' said the good woman reluctantly. 'He went from here yesterday on a sudden—to take the train, I understood.'

"'Yesterday? When? At what time, please?' asked the young lady. There was a fear, which she had been putting from her all day. It was getting a footing now.

"'Well, it would be about midday. I know it was just after Gwen Madoc called in about the——'

"But the girl was gone. It was not to Mrs. Campbell she could make a moan. It was only the night wind that caught the 'Oh, cruel! cruel!' which broke from her as she went up the hill. Whether she slept that night at all I am not able to say. Only that when it was dawn she was out upon the cliffs, her face very white and sad-looking. The fishermen who were up early, going out with the ebb,

saw her at times walking fast and then standing still and looking seaward. But I do not know what she was thinking, only I should fancy that the gulls had a different cry for her now, and it is certain that when she had returned and came down into the parlor at Court for the funeral, there were none of the Evanses could look her in the face with comfort.

"They were all there, of course. Mr. Llewellyn Evans—he was an elderly man, with a gray beard like a bird's nest, and very thick lips—was sitting with his wife on the horsehair sofa. The Evanses of Nant, who were young men with lank faces and black hair combed upward, were by the door. The Evan Bevans were at the table; and there were others, besides Mr. Griffith Hughes, who was undoing some papers when she entered.

"He rose and shook hands with her, marking pitifully the dark hollows under her eyes, and inwardly confirming his resolution to get her a substantial settlement. Then he hesitated, looking doubtfully at the others. 'We are going to read the will before the funeral instead of afterward,' he said.

"'Oh!' she answered, taken aback—for in truth she had forgotten all about the will. 'I did not know. I will go, and come back later.'

"'No, indeed!' cried Mrs. Llewellyn Evans, 'you had better stop and hear the will—though no relation, to be sure.'

"But at that moment Gwen Madoc came in, and peered round with a grim air of importance. 'Maybe someone,' she said in a low voice, 'would like to take a last look at the poor master?'

"But no one moved. They sighed and shook their heads at one another as if they would like to do so—but no one moved. They were anxious, you see, to hear the will. Only Peggy, who had turned to go out, said, 'Yes, Gwen, I should,' and slipped out with the old woman.

"'There is nothing to keep us now?' said Mr. Hughes briskly when the door was closed again. And everyone nodding assent the lawyer went on to read the will, which was not a long one. It was received with a murmur of satisfaction, and much use of pocket-handkerchiefs.

"'Very fair!' said Mr. Llewellyn Evans,

'He was a clever man, our old friend.' All the legatees murmured after him 'Very fair!' and a word went round about the home-brewed, and Robert Evans' recipe for it. Then Llewellyn, who thought he ought to be taking the lead at Court now, said it was about time to be going to church.

"'There is one matter,' put in Mr. Griffith Hughes, 'which I think ought to be settled while we are all together. You see that there is a—what I may call a charge on the three main portions of the property in favor of Miss McNeill.'

"'Indeed, but what is that you are saying?' cried Llewellyn sharply. 'Do you mean that there is a rent charge?'

"'Not exactly a rent charge,' said the lawyer.

"'No!' cried Llewellyn with a twinkle in his eyes. 'Nor any obligation in law, sir?'

"'Well, no,' assented Mr. Hughes grudgingly.

"'Then,' said Llewellyn Evans, getting up and putting his hands in his pockets, while he winked at the others, 'we will talk of that another time.'

"But Mr. Hughes said, 'No!' He was a kind man, and very anxious to do the best for the girl, but he somewhat lost his temper. 'No!' he said, growing red. 'You will observe, if you please, Mr. Evans, that the testator says, "Forthwith —forthwith." So that, as sole executor, it is my duty to ask you to state your intentions now.'

"'Well, indeed, then,' said Llewellyn, changing his face to a kind of blank, 'I have no intentions. I think that the family has done more than enough for the girl already.'

"And he would say no otherwise. Nor was it to any purpose that the lawyer looked at Mrs. Llewellyn. She was examining the furniture, and feeling the stuffing of the sofa, and did not seem to hear. He could make nothing of the three Evanses, Nant. They all cried, 'Yes, indeed!' to what Llewellyn said. Only the Evan Bevans remained, and he turned to them in despair.

"'I am sure,' he said, addressing himself to them, 'that you will do something to carry out the testator's wishes? Your share under the will, Mr. Bevan, will

amount to three hundred a year. This young lady has nothing—no relations, no home. May I take it that you will settle —say fifty pounds a year upon her? It need only be for her life.'

"Mr. Bevan fidgeted under this appeal. His wife answered it. 'Certainly not, Mr. Hughes. If it were twenty pounds now, once for all, or even twenty-five—and Llewellyn and my nephews would say the same—I think we might manage that?'

"But Llewellyn shook his head obstinately. 'I have said I have no intentions, and I am a man of my word!' he answered. 'Let the girl go out to service. It is what we have always wanted her to do. Here are my nephews. They won't mind a young housekeeper.'

"Well, they all laughed at this except Mr. Hughes, who gathered up his papers looking very black, and not thinking of future clients. Llewellyn, however, did not care a bit for that, but walked to the bell, masterful-like, and rang it. 'Tell the undertaker,' he said to the servant, 'that we are ready.'

"It was as if the words had been a sig-

nal, for they were followed almost immediately by an outcry overhead and quick running upon the stairs. The legatees looked uncomfortably at the carpet: the lawyer was blacker than before. He said to himelf, 'Now that poor child has fainted!' The confusion seemed to last some minutes. Then the door was opened, not by the undertaker, but by Gwen Madoc. The mourners rose with a sigh of relief; to their surprise she passed by even Llewellyn, and with a frightened face walked across to the lawyer. She whispered something in his ear.

"'What!' he cried, starting back a pace from her, and speaking so that the wine-glasses on the table rattled again. 'Do you know what you are saying, woman?'

"'It is true,' she answered, half crying, 'and no fault indeed of mine neither.'

Gwen added more in quick, short sentences, which the family, strain their ears as they might, could not overhear.

"'I will come! I will come!' cried the lawyer. He waved his hand to them as a sign to make room for her to pass out. Then he turned to them, a queer look upon his face; it was not triumph altogether,

for there was discomfiture and apprehension in it as well. 'You will believe me, he said, 'that I am as much taken aback as yourselves—that till this moment I have been honestly as much in the dark as anyone. It seems—so I am told—that our old friend is not dead.'

"'What!' cried Llewellyn in his turn. 'What do you mean?' and he raised his black-gloved hands as in refutation.

"'What I say,' replied Mr. Hughes patiently. 'I hear—wonderful as it sounds—that he is not dead. Something about a trance, I believe—a mistake happily discovered in time. I tell you all I know; and however it comes about, it is clear we ought to be glad that Mr. Robert Evans is spared to us.'

"With that he was glad to escape from the room. I am told that their faces were very strange to see. There was a long silence. Llewellyn was the first to speak. He swore a big oath and banged his great hand upon the table. 'I don't believe it!' he cried. 'I don't believe it! It is a trick!'

"But as he spoke the door opened behind him, and he and all turned to see

what they had never thought to see, I am sure. They had come to walk in Robert Evans' funeral; and here was the gaunt, stooping form of Robert Evans himself coming in, with an arm of Gwen Madoc on one side and of Miss Peggy on the other — Robert Evans beyond doubt alive. Behind him were the lawyer and Dr. Jones, a smile on their lips, and three or four women half frightened, half wondering.

"The old man was pale, and seemed to totter a little, but when the doctor would have placed a chair for him, he declined it, and stood gazing about him, wonderfully composed for a man just risen from his coffin. He had all his old grim aspect as he looked upon the family. Llewellyn's declaration was still in their ears. They could find not a word to say either of joy or grief.

" 'Well, indeed,' said Robert, with a dry chuckle, 'have none of you a word to throw at me? I am a ghost, I suppose? Ha!' he exclaimed, as his eye fell on the papers which Mr. Hughes had left upon the table, 'so! so! That is why you are not overjoyed at seeing me. You have

been reading my will. Well, Llewellyn! Have not you a word to say to me now you know for what I had got you down?'

"At that Llewellyn found his tongue, and the others chimed in finely. Only there was something in the old man's manner that they did not like; and presently, when they had all told him how glad they were to see him again—just for all the world as if he had been ill for a few days—Robert Evans turned again to Llewellyn.

"'You had fixed what you would do for my girl here, I suppose?' he said, patting her shoulder gently, at which the family winced. 'It was a hundred a year you promised to settle, you know. You will have arranged all that.'

"Lewellyn looked stealthily at Mr. Hughes, who was standing at Robert's elbow, and muttered that they had not reached that stage.

"'What?' cried the old man sharply. 'How was that?'

"'I was intending,' Llewellyn began lamely, 'to settle——'

"'You were intending!' Robert Evans burst forth in a voice so changed that

they all started back. 'You are a liar! You were intending to settle nothing! I know it well! I knew it long ago! Nothing, I say! As for you,' he went on, wheeling furiously round upon the Evanses of Nant, 'you knew my wishes. What were you going to do for her? What, I say? Speak, you hobbledehoys!'

"For they were backing from him in absolute fear of his passion, looking at one another or at the sullen face of Llewellyn Evans, or anywhere save at him. At length the eldest blurted out, 'Whatever Llewellyn meant to do we were going to do, sir.'

"'You speak the truth there,' cried old Robert bitterly; 'for that was nothing, you know. Very well! I promise you that what Llewellyn gets of my property you shall get too—and it will be nothing! You, Bevan,' and he turned himself toward the Evan Bevans, who were shaking in their shoes, 'I am told, did offer to do something for my girl.'

"'Yes, dear Robert,' cried Mrs. Bevan, radiant and eager, 'we did indeed.'

"'So I hear. Well, when I make my next will, I will take care to set you down

for just so much as you proposed to give her! Peggy, *bach*,' he continued, turning from the chapfallen lady, and putting into the girl's hands the will which the lawyer had given him, 'tear up this rubbish! Tear it up! Now let us have something to eat in the other room. What, Llewellyn, no appetite?'

"But the family did not stay even to partake of the home-brewed. They were out of the house, I am told, before the coffin and the undertaker's men. There was big talking among them, as they went, of a conspiracy and a lunatic asylum. But though, to be sure, it was a wonderful recovery, and the doctor and Mr. Hughes, as they drove away after dinner, were very friendly together—which may have been only the home-brewed—at any rate the sole outcome of Llewellyn's talking and inquiries was that everyone laughed very much, and Robert Evans' name for a clever man was known beyond Carnarvon.

"Of course it would be open house at Court that day, with plenty of eating and drinking and coming and going. But toward five o'clock the place grew quiet

again. The visitors had gone home, and Gwen Madoc was upstairs. The old man was sleeping in his chair opposite the settle, and Miss Peggy was sitting on the window-seat watching him, her hands in her lap, her thoughts far away. Maybe she was trying to be really glad that the home, about which the cows lowed and the gulls screamed in the afternoon stillness and made it seem home each minute, was hers still; that she was not quite alone, nor friendless, nor poor. Maybe she was striving not to think of the thing which had been taken from her and could not be given back. Whatever her thoughts, she was aroused by some sound to find her eyes full of hot tears, through which she could dimly see that the old man was awake and looking at her with a strange expression, which disappeared as she became aware of it.

"He began to speak. 'Providence has been very good to us, Peggy,' he said, with grim meaning. 'It is well for you, my girl, that our eyes are open to see our kind friends as they are. There is one besides those who were here this morning that will wish he had not been so hasty.'

"She rose quickly and looked out of the window. 'Don't speak of him. Let us forget him,' she pleaded, in a low tone.

"But Robert Evans seemed to take a delight in the—well, the goodness of Providence. 'If he had come to see you only once, when you were in trouble,' he went on, as if he were summing up the case in his own mind, and she were but a stick or a stone, 'we could have forgiven him, and I would have said you were right. Or even if he had written, eh?'

"'Oh, yes, yes!' sobbed the girl, her tears raining down her averted face. 'Don't torture me! You were right and I was wrong—all wrong!'

"'Well, yes, yes! Just so. But come here, my girl,' said the old man. 'Come!' he repeated imperiously, as, surprised in the midst of her grief, she wavered and hesitated, 'sit here,' and he pointed to the settle opposite to him. 'Now, suppose I were to tell you he had written, and that the letter had been—mislaid, shall we say? and come somehow to my hands? Now, don't get excited, girl!'

"'Oh!' cried Peggy, her hands fallen, her lips parted, her eyes wide and fright-

ened, her whole form rigid with questioning.

"'Just suppose that, my dear,' continued Robert, 'and that the letter were now before us—would you abide by its contents? Remember, he must have much to explain. Would you let me decide whether his explanation were satisfactory or not?'

"She was trembling with expectation, hope. But she tried to think of the matter calmly, to remember her lover's hurried flight, the lack of word or message for her, her own misery. She nodded silently, and held out her hand.

"He drew a letter from his pocket. 'You will let me see it?' he said suspiciously.

"'Oh, yes!' she cried, and fled with it to the window. He watched her while she tore it open and read first one page and then another—there were but two, it was very short—watched her while she thrust it from her and looked at it as a whole, then drew it to her and kissed it again and again.

"'Wait a bit! wait a bit!' cried he testily. 'Now, let me see it.'

"She turned upon him almost fiercely, holding it away behind her, as if it were some living thing he might hurt. 'He thought he would meet me at the junction,' she stammered between laughing and crying. 'He was going to London to see his sister—that she might take me in. And he will be here to fetch me this evening. There! Take it!' and suddenly remembering herself she stretched out her hand and gave him the letter.

"'You promised to abide by my decision, you know,' said the old man gravely.

"'I will not!' she cried impetuously. 'Never!'

"'You promised,' he said.

"'I don't care! I don't care!' she replied, clasping her hands nervously. 'No one shall come between us.'

"'Very well,' said Robert Evans, 'then I need not decide. But you had better tell Owen to take the trap to the station to meet your man.'"

IN CUPID'S TOILS.

I.

HER STORY.

"GLARE," I said, "I wish that we had brought some better clothes, if it were only one frock. You look the oddest figure."

And she did. She was lying head to head with me on the thick moss that clothed one part of the river bank above Breistolen near the Sogn Fiord. We were staying at Breistolen, but there was no moss thereabouts, nor in all the Sogn district, I often thought, so deep and soft, and so dazzling orange and white and crimson as that particular patch. It lay quite high upon the hills, and there were great gray bowlders peeping through the moss here and there, very fit to break your legs, if you were careless. Little more than a mile higher up was the watershed, where our river, putting away

with reluctance a first thought of going down the farther slope toward Bysberg, parted from its twin brother, who was thither bound with scores upon scores of puny, green-backed fishlets; and instead, came down our side gliding and swishing and swirling faster and faster, and deeper and wider every hundred yards to Breistolen, full of red-speckled yellow trout, all half a pound apiece, and very good to eat.

But they were not so sweet or toothsome to our girlish tastes as the tawny-orange cloud-berries which Clare and I were eating as we lay. So busy was she with the luscious pile we had gathered that I had to wait for an answer. And then, "Speak for yourself," she said. "I'm sure you look like a short-coated baby. He is somewhere up the river, too." Munch, munch, munch!

"Who is, you impertinent, greedy little chit?"

"Oh, you know!" she answered. "Don't you wish you had your gray plush here, Bab?"

I flung a look of calm disdain at her; but whether it was the berry juice which stained our faces that took from its effect,

or the free mountain air which papa says saps the foundations of despotism, that made her callous, at any rate she only laughed scornfully and got up and went off down the stream with her rod, leaving me to finish the cloud-berries, and stare lazily up at the snow-patches on the hillside —which somehow put me in mind of the gray plush—and follow or not, as I liked.

Clare has a wicked story of how I gave in to papa, and came to start without anything but those rough clothes. She says he said—and Jack Buchanan has told me that lawyers put no faith in anything that he says she says, or she says he says, which proves how much truth there is in this—that if Bab took none but her oldest clothes, and fished all day, and had no one to run upon her errands—he meant Jack and the others, I suppose—she might possibly grow an inch in Norway. Just as if I wanted to grow an inch? An inch indeed! I am five feet one and a half high, and papa, who puts me an inch shorter, is the worst measurer in the world. As for Miss Clare, she would give all her inches for my eyes. So there!

After Clare left it began to be dull and

chilly. When I had pictured to myself how nice it would be to dress for dinner again, and chosen the frock I would wear upon the first evening, I grew tired of the snow-patches, and started up stream, stumbling and falling into holes, and clambering over rocks, and only careful to save my rod and my face. It was no occasion for the gray plush, but I had made up my mind to reach a pool which lay, I knew, a little above me; having filched a yellow-bodied fly from Clare's hat, with a view to that particular place.

Our river did the oddest things hereabouts—pleased to be so young, I suppose. It was not a great churning stream of snow-water, foaming and milky, such as we had seen in some parts—streams that affected to be always in flood, and had the look of forcing the rocks asunder and clearing their path, even while you watched them with your fingers in your ears. Our river was none of these: still it was swifter than English rivers are wont to be, and in parts deeper, and transparent as glass. In one place it would sweep over a ledge and fall wreathed in spray into a spreading lake

of black, rock-bound water. Then it would narrow again until, where you could almost jump across, it darted smooth and unbroken down a polished shoot with a swoop like a swallow's. Out of this it would hurry afresh to brawl along a gravelly bed, skipping jauntily over first one and then another ridge of stones that had silted up weir-wise and made as if they would bar the channel. Under the lee of these there were lovely pools.

To be able to throw into mine, I had to walk out along the ridge, on which the water was shallow, yet sufficiently deep to cover my boots. But I was well rewarded. The "forellin"—the Norse name for trout, and as pretty as their girls' wavy fair hair—were rising so merrily that I hooked and landed one in five minutes, the fly falling from its mouth as it touched the stones. I hate taking out hooks. I used at one time to leave the fly in the fish's mouth to be removed by papa at the weighing house; until Clare pricked her tongue at dinner with an almost new, red hackle, and was so mean as to keep it, though I remembered then what I had done with it, and was certain

it was mine—which was nothing less than dishonest of her.

I had just got back to my place and made a fine cast, when there came—not the leap, and splash, and tug which announced the half-pounder—but a deep, rich gurgle as the fly was gently sucked under, and then a quiet, growing strain upon the line, which began to move away down the pool in a way that made the winch spin again and filled me with mysterious pleasure. I was not conscious of striking or of anything but that I had hooked a really good fish, and I clutched the rod with both hands and set my feet as tightly as I could upon the slippery gravel. The line moved up and down, and this way and that, now steadily and as with a purpose, and then again with an eccentric rush that made the top of the rod spring and bend so that I looked for it to snap each moment. My hands began to grow numb, and the landing-net, hitherto an ornament, fell out of my waist-belt and went I knew not whither. I suppose I must have stepped unwittingly into deeper water, for I felt that my skirts were afloat, and altogether

things were going dreadfully against me, when the presence of an ally close at hand was announced by a cheery shout from the far side of the river.

"Keep up your point! Keep up your point!" someone cried briskly. "That is better!"

The unexpected sound—it was a man's voice—did something to keep my heart up. But for answer I could only shriek, "I can't! It will break!" watching the top of my rod as it jigged up and down, very much in the fashion of Clare performing what she calls a waltz. She dances as badly as a man.

"No, it will not," he cried back bluntly. "Keep it up, and let out a little line with your fingers when he pulls hardest."

We were forced to shout and scream. The wind had risen and was adding to the noise of the water. Soon I heard him wading behind me. "Where's your landing-net?" he asked, with the most provoking coolness.

"Oh, in the pool! Somewhere about. I am sure I don't know," I answered wildly.

What he said to this I could not catch,

but it sounded rude. And then he waded off to fetch, as I guessed, his own net. By the time he reached me again I was in a sad plight, feet like ice, and hands benumbed, while the wind, and rain, and hail, which had come down upon us with a sudden violence, unknown, it is to be hoped, anywhere else, were mottling my face all sorts of unbecoming colors. But the line was taut. And wet and cold went for nothing five minutes later, when the fish lay upon the bank, its prismatic sides slowly turning pale and dull, and I knelt over it half in pity and half in triumph, but wholly forgetful of the wind and rain.

"You did that very pluckily, little one," said the on-looker; "but I am afraid you will suffer for it by and by. You must be chilled through."

Quickly as I looked up at him, I only met a good-humored smile. He did not mean to be rude. And after all, when I was in such a mess, it was not possible that he could see what I was like. He was wet enough himself. The rain was streaming from the brim of the soft hat which he had turned down to shelter his face, and trickling from his chin, and turn-

ing his shabby Norfolk jacket a darker shade. As for his hands, they looked red and knuckly enough, and he had been wading almost to his waist. But he looked, I don't know why, all the stronger and manlier and nicer for these things, because, perhaps, he cared for them not one whit. What I looked like myself I dared not think. My skirts were as short as short could be, and they were soaked; most of my hair was unplaited, my gloves were split, and my sodden boots were out of shape. I was forced, too, to shiver and shake from cold, which was provoking, for I knew it made me seem half as small again.

"Thank you, I am a little cold, Mr. —— Mr.——" I said gravely, only my teeth would chatter so that he laughed outright as he took me up with——

"Herapath. And to whom have I the honor of speaking?"

"I am Miss Guest," I said miserably. It was too cold to be frigid to advantage.

"Commonly called Bab, I think," the wretch answered. "The walls of our hut are not sound-proof, you see. But come, the sooner you get back to dry clothes

and the stove, the better, Bab. You can cross the river just below, and cut off half a mile that way."

"I can't," I said obstinately. Bab, indeed! How dared he?

"Oh yes, you can," with intolerable good temper. "You shall take your rod and I the prey. You cannot be wetter than you are now."

He had his way, of course, since I did not foresee that at the ford he would lift me up bodily and carry me over the deeper part without a pretense of asking leave, or a word of apology. It was done so quickly that I had no time to remonstrate. Still I was not going to let it pass, and when I had shaken myself straight again, I said, with all the haughtiness I could assume, "Don't you think, Mr. Herapath that it would have been more—more——"

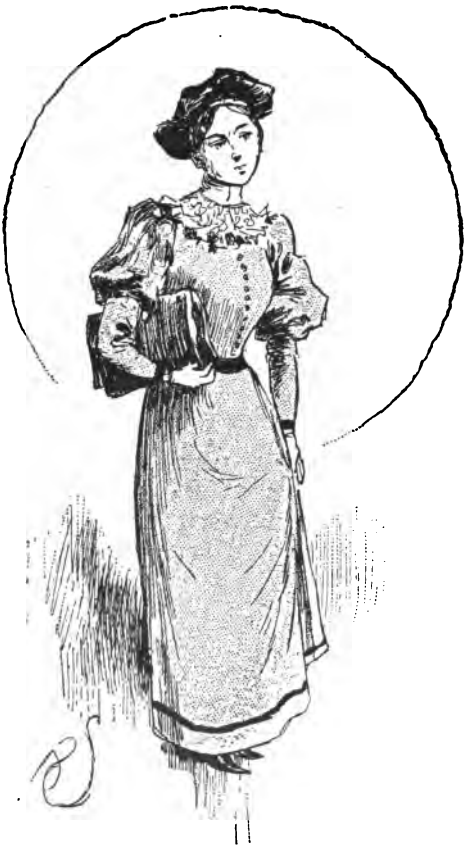
"Polite to offer to carry you over, child? No, not at all. It will be wiser and warmer for you to run down the hill. Come along!"

And without more ado, while I was still choking with rage, he seized my hands and set off at a trot, lugging me through

the sloppy places much as I have seen a nurse drag a fractious child down Constitution Hill. It was not wonderful that I soon lost the little breath his speech had left me, and was powerless to complain when we reached the bridge. I could only thank Heaven that there was no sign of Clare. I think I should have died of mortification if she had seen us come down the hill hand-in-hand in that ridiculous fashion. But she had gone home, and at any rate I escaped that degradation.

A wet stool-car and wetter pony were dimly visible on the bridge; to which, as we came up, a damp urchin creeping from some crevice added himself. I was pushed in as if I had no will of my own, the gentleman sprang up beside me, the boy tucked himself away somewhere behind, and the little "teste" set off at a canter, so deceived by the driver's excellent imitation of "Pss," the Norse for "Tchk," that in ten minutes we were at home.

"Well, I never!" Clare said, surveying me from a respectful distance, when at last I was safe in our room. "I would not be seen in such a state by a man for all the fish in the sea!"



"BAB."

And she looked so tall, and trim, and neat, that it was the more provoking. At the moment I was too miserable to answer her, and had to find comfort in promising myself that when we were back in Bolton Gardens I would see that Fräulein kept Miss Clare's pretty nose to the grindstone though it were ever so much her last term, or Jack were ever so fond of her. Papa was in the plot against me, too. What right had he to thank Mr. Herapath for bringing "his little girl" home safe? He can be pompous enough at times. I never knew a stout Queen's Counsel—and papa is stout—who was not, any more than a thin one who did not contradict. It is in their patents, I think.

Mr. Herapath dined with us that evening—if fish and potatoes and boiled eggs, and sour bread and pancakes, and claret and coffee can be called a dinner—but nothing I could do, though I made the best of my wretched frock and was as stiff as Clare herself, could alter his first impression. It was too bad; he had no eyes! He either could not or would not see anyone but the draggled Bab—fifteen at most and a very tom-boy—

whom he had carried across the river. He styled Clare, who talked Baedeker to him in her primmest and most precocious way, Miss Guest, and once at least during the evening dubbed me plain Bab. I tried to freeze him with a look then, and papa gave him a taste of the pompous manner, saying coldly that I was older than I seemed. But it was not a bit of use; I could see that he set it all down to the grand airs of a spoiled child. If I had put my hair up, it might have opened his eyes, but Clare teased me about it and I was too proud for that.

When I asked him if he was fond of dancing, he said good-naturedly, "I don't visit very much, Miss Bab. I am generally engaged in the evening."

Here was a chance. I was going to say that that, no doubt, was the reason why I had never met him, when papa ruthlessly cut me short by asking, "You are not in the law?"

"No," he replied, "I am in the London Fire Brigade."

I think that we all upon the instant saw him in a helmet, sitting at the door of the fire station by St. Martin's Church.

Clare turned crimson, and papa seemed on a sudden to call his patent to mind. The moment before I had been as angry as angry could be with our guest, but I was not going to look on and see him snubbed when he was dining with us and all. So I rushed into the gap as quickly as surprise would let me with, "Good gracious, how nice! Do tell me all about a fire!"

It made matters—my matters—worse, for I could have cried with vexation when I read in his face next moment that he had looked for their astonishment; while the ungrateful fellow set down my eager remark to mere childish ignorance.

"Some time I will," he said, with a quiet smile *de haut en bas;* "but I do not often attend one in person. I am Captain ——'s private secretary, aid-de-camp, and general factotum."

And it turned out that he was the son of a certain Canon Herapath, so that papa lost sight of his patent box altogether, and they set to discussing Mr. Gladstone, while I slipped off to bed, feeling as small as I ever did in my life and out of temper with everybody. It was a long time since I had been used to

young men talking politics to papa when they could talk—politics—to me.

Possibly I deserved the week of vexation which followed; but it was almost more than I could bear. He—Mr. Herapath, of course—was always about fishing or lounging outside the little white posting-house, taking walks and meals with us, and seeming heartily to enjoy papa's society. He came with us when we drove to the top of the pass to get a glimpse of the Sulethid peak; and it looked so brilliantly clear and softly beautiful as it seemed to float, just tinged with color, in a far-off atmosphere of its own beyond the dark ranges of nearer hills, that I began to think at once of the drawing room in Bolton Gardens, with a cozy fire burning and afternoon tea coming up. The tears came into my eyes, and he saw them before I could turn away from the view; and said to papa that he feared his little girl was tired as well as cold, and so spoiled all my pleasure. I looked back afterward as papa and I drove down. He was walking by Clare's carcole, and they were laughing heartily.

And that was the way always. He was

such an elder brother to me—a thing I never had and do not want—that a dozen times a day I set my teeth viciously together and said to myself that if ever we met in London—but what nonsense that was, because, of course, it mattered nothing to me what he was thinking, only he had no right to be so rudely familiar. That was all; but it was quite enough to make me dislike him.

However, a sunny morning in the holidays is a cheerful thing, and when I strolled down stream with my rod on the day after our expedition, I felt I could enjoy myself very nearly as much as I had before his coming spoiled our party. I dawdled along, now trying a pool, now clambering up the hill-sides to pick raspberries, and now counting the magpies that flew across, feeling altogether very placid and good and contented. I had chosen the lower river because Mr. Herapath usually fished the upper part, and I would not be ruffled this nice day. So I was the more vexed to come suddenly upon him fishing; and fishing where he had no right to be. Papa had spoken to him about the danger of it, and

he had as good as said he would not do it again. Yet there he was, thinking, I dare say, that we should not know. It was a spot where one bank rose into quite a cliff, frowning over a deep pool at the foot of some falls. Close to the cliff the water still ran with the speed of a mill-race, so fast as to endanger a good swimmer. But on the far side of this current there was a bit of slack water, which was tempting enough to have set someone's wits to work to devise means to fish it, which from the top of the cliff was impossible. Just above the water was a ledge, a foot wide, perhaps, which might have done, only it did not reach to this end of the cliff. However, that foolhardy person had espied this, and got over the gap by bridging the latter with a bit of plank, and then had drowned himself or gone away, in either case leaving his board to tempt others to do likewise.

And there was Mr. Herapath fishing from the ledge. It made me giddy to look at him. The rock overhung the water so much that he could not stand upright; the first person who got there

must surely have learned to curl himself up from much sleeping in Norwegian beds, which were short for me. I thought of this oddly enough as I watched him, and laughed, and was for going on. But when I had walked a few yards, meaning to pass round the rear of the cliff, I began to fancy all sorts of foolish things would happen. I felt sure that I should have no more peace or pleasure if I left him there. I hesitated. Yes, I would. I would go down, and ask him to leave the place; and, of course, he would do it.

I lost no time, but ran down the slope smartly and carelessly. My way lay over loose shale mingled with large stones, and it was steep. It was wonderful how quickly an accident happens; how swiftly a thing that cannot be undone is done, and we are left wishing—oh, so vainly—that we could put the world, and all things in it, back by a few seconds. I was checking myself near the bottom, when a big stone on which I stepped moved under me. The shale began to slip in a mass, and the stone to roll. It was all done in a moment. I stayed myself, that was easy enough, but the stone took two

bounds, jumped sideways, struck the piece of board, which was only resting lightly at either end, and before I could take it all in the little bridge plunged end first into the current, which swept it out of sight in an instant.

He threw up his hands in affright, for he had turned, and we both saw it happen. He made indeed as if he would try to save it, but that was impossible; and then, while I cowered in dismay, he waved his arm to me in the direction of home—again and again. The roar of the falls drowned what he said, but I guessed his meaning. I could not help him myself, but I could fetch help. It was three miles to Breistolen,—rough, rocky ones,—and I doubted whether he could keep his cramped position with that noise deafening him, and the endless whirling stream before his eyes, while I was going and coming. But there was no better way I could think of; and even as I wavered, he signaled to me again imperatively. For an instant everything seemed to go round with me, but it was not the time for that yet, and I tried to collect myself and harden my heart. Up the bank I

went steadily, and once at the top set off at a run homeward.

I cannot tell at all how I did it; how I passed over the uneven ground, or whether I went quickly or slowly save by the reckoning papa made afterward. I can only remember one long hurrying scramble; now I panted uphill, now I ran down, now I was on my face in a hole, breathless and half-stunned, and now I was up to my knees in water. I slipped and dropped down places I should at other times have shrunk from, and hurt myself so that I bore the marks for months. But I thought nothing of these things: all my being was spent in hurrying on for his life, the clamor of every cataract I passed seeming to stop my heart's beating with very fear. So I reached Breistolen and panted over the bridge and up to the little white house lying so quiet in the afternoon sunshine, papa's stool-car even then at the door ready to take him to some favorite pool. Somehow I made him understand in broken words that Herapath was in danger, drowning already, for all I knew, and then I seized a great pole which was leaning

against the porch, and climbed into the car. Papa was not slow, either; he snatched a coil of rope from the luggage, and away we went, a man and boy whom he had hastily called running behind us. We had lost very little time, but so much may happen in so little time.

We were forced to leave the car a quarter of a mile from that part of the river, and walk or run the rest of the way. We all ran, even papa, as I had never known him run before. My heart sank at the groan he let escape him when I pointed out the spot. We came to it one by one. The ledge was empty. Jem Herapath was gone. I suppose it startled me. At any rate I could only look at the water in a dazed way and cry quietly, without much feeling that it was my doing; while the men, shouting to one another in strange, hushed voices, searched about for any sign of his fate. "Jem! Jem Herapath!" So he had written his name only yesterday in the travelers' book at the posting-house, and I had sullenly watched him from the window, and then had sneaked to the book and read it. That was yester-

day, and now! Oh, Jem, to hear you say "Bab" once more!

"Bab! Why, Miss Bab, what is the matter?"

Safe and sound! Yes, there he was when I turned, safe and strong and cool, rod in hand and a quiet smile in his eyes. Just as I had seen him yesterday, and thought never to see him again; and saying "Bab," exactly as of old, so that something in my throat—it may have been anger at his rudeness, but I do not think it was—prevented me saying a word until all the others came around us, and a babel of Norse and English, and something that was neither, yet both, set in.

"But how is this?" objected my father, when he could be heard, "you are quite dry, my boy?"

"Dry! Why not, sir? For goodness' sake, what is the matter?"

"The matter? Didn't you fall in, or something of the kind?" papa asked, bewildered by this new aspect of the case.

"It does not look like it, does it? Your daughter gave me a very uncomfortable start by nearly doing so."

Everyone looked at him for an explanation. "How did you manage to get from the ledge?" I said feebly. Where was the mistake? I had not dreamed it.

"From the ledge? Why, by the other end, to be sure, so that I had to walk back round the hill. Still, I did not mind, for I was thankful that it was the plank and not you that fell in."

"I—I thought—you could not get from the ledge," I muttered. The possibility of getting off at the other end had never occurred to me, and so I had made such a simpleton of myself. It was too absurd, too ridiculous! It was no wonder that they all screamed with laughter at the fool's errand they had come upon, and stamped about and clung to one another. But when *he* laughed too,—and he did until the tears came into his eyes,—there was not an ache or pain in my body—and I had cut my wrist to the bone against a splinter of rock—that hurt me one-half as much. Surely *he* might have seen another side to it. But he did not; and so I managed to hide my bandaged wrist from him, and papa drove me home. There I broke down entirely, and Clare

put me to bed and petted me, and was very good to me. And when I came down next day, with an ache in every part of me, he was gone.

"He asked me to tell you," said Clare, not looking up from the fly she was tying at the window, "that he thought you were the bravest girl he had ever met."

So he understood now, when others had explained it to him. "No, Clare," I said coldly; "he did not say that exactly. He said, 'the bravest little girl.'" For, indeed, lying upstairs with the window open, I had heard him set off on his long drive to Laerdalsören. As for papa, he was half-proud and half-ashamed of my foolishness, and wholly at a loss to think how I could have made the mistake.

"You've generally some common sense, my dear," he said that day at dinner, "and how in the world you could have been so ready to fancy the man in danger, I—can—not—imagine!"

"Papa," put in Clare suddenly, "your elbow is upsetting the salt."

And as I had to move my seat just then to avoid the glare of the stove, which was falling on my face, we never thought it out.

II.

HIS STORY.

I WAS not dining out much at that time, partly because my acquaintance in town was limited, and somewhat too because I cared little for it. But these were pleasant people, the old gentleman witty and amusing, the children, lively girls, nice to look at and good to talk with. The party had too a holiday flavor about them wholesome to recall in Scotland Yard: and as I had thought, playtime over, I should see no more of them, I was proportionately pleased to find that Mr. Guest had not forgotten me, and pleased also—shrewdly expecting that we might kill our fish over again—to regard his invitation to dinner at a quarter to eight as a royal command.

But if I took it so, I was sadly wanting in the regal courtesy to match. What with one delay owing to work that would admit of none, and another caused by a cabman strange to the ways of town, it was twenty-five minutes after the hour named when I reached Bolton Gardens.

A stately man, so like the Queen's Counsel that it was plain upon whom the latter modeled himself, ushered me straight into the dining room, where Guest greeted me very kindly, and met my excuses by apologies on his part—for preferring, I suppose, the comfort of eleven people to mine. Then he took me down the table, and said, "My daughter," and Miss Guest shook hands with me and pointed to the chair at her left. I had still, as I unfolded my napkin, to say "Clear, if you please," and then I was free to turn and apologize to her; being a little shy, and, as I have said, a somewhat infrequent diner out.

I think that I never saw so remarkable a likeness—to her younger sister—in my life. She might have been little Bab herself, but for her dress and some striking differences. Miss Guest could not be more than eighteen, in form almost as fairy-like as the little one, with the same child-like, innocent look on her face. She had the big gray eyes, too, that were so charming in Bab; but in her they were more soft and tender and thoughtful, and a thousand times more charming. Her hair too was brown and wavy: only,

instead of hanging loose or in a pig-tail, anywhere and anyhow, in a fashion I well remembered, it was coiled in a coronal on the shapely little head, that was so Greek, and in its gracious, stately, old-fashioned pose, so unlike Bab's. Her dress, of some creamy, gauzy stuff, revealed the prettiest white throat in the world, and arms decked in pearls, and, so far, no more recalled my little fishing-mate than the sedate self-possession and assured dignity of this girl, as she talked to her other neighbor, suggested Bab making pancakes and chattering with the landlady's children in her strangely and wonderfully acquired Norse. It was not Bab in fact: and yet it almost might have been: an etherealized, queenly, womanly Bab—who presently turned to me:

"Have you quite settled down after your holiday?" she asked, staying the apologies I was for pouring into her ear.

"I had until this evening, but the sight of your father is like a breath of fiord air. I hope your sisters are well."

"My sisters?" she murmured wonderingly, her fork halfway to her pretty mouth and her attitude one of questioning.

"Yes," I said, rather puzzled. "You know they were with your father when I had the good fortune to meet him. Miss Clare and Bab."

"Eh?" dropping her fork on the plate with a great clatter.

"Yes, Miss Guest; Miss Clare and Miss Bab."

I really began to feel uncomfortable. Her color rose, and she looked me in the face in a half-proud, half-fearful way as if she resented the inquiry. It was a relief to me, when, with some show of confusion, she at length stammered, "Oh, yes, I beg your pardon, of course they were! How very foolish of me! They are quite well, thank you," and so was silent again. But I understand now. Mr. Guest had omitted to mention my name, and she had taken me for someone else of whose holiday she knew. I gathered from the aspect of the table and the room that the Guests saw a good deal of company, and it was a very natural mistake, though by the grave look she bent upon her plate it was clear that the young hostess was taking herself to task for it: not without, if I might judge from the lurking smile at the corners of

her mouth, a humorous sense of the slip, and perhaps of the difference between myself and the gentleman whose part I had been unwittingly supporting. Meanwhile I had a chance of looking at her unchecked; and thought of Dresden china, she was so frail and pretty.

"You were nearly drowned, or something of the kind, were you not?" she asked, after an interval during which we had both talked to others.

"Well, not precisely. Your sister fancied I was in danger, and behaved in the pluckiest manner—so bravely that I can almost feel sorry that the danger was not there to dignify her heroism."

"That was like her," she answered, in a tone just a little scornful. "You must have thought her a terrible tomboy."

While she was speaking there came one of those terrible lulls in the talk, and Mr. Guest, overhearing, cried: "Who is that you are abusing, my dear? Let us all share in the sport. If it's Clare, I think I can name one who is a far worse hoyden upon occasion."

"It is no one of whom you have ever heard, papa," she answered archly. "It

is a person in whom Mr.—Mr. Herapath"—I had murmured my name as she stumbled—"and I are interested. Now, tell me, did you not think so?" she murmured graciously, leaning the slightest bit toward me, and opening her eyes as she looked into mine in a way that to a man who had spent the day in a dusty room in Great Scotland Yard was sufficiently intoxicating.

"No," I said, lowering my voice in imitation of hers. "No, Miss Guest, I did not think so at all. I thought your sister a brave little thing—rather careless, as children are apt to be, but likely to grow into a charming girl."

I wondered, marking how she bit her lip and refrained from assent, whether, impossible as it must seem to anyone looking in her face, there might not be something of the shrew about my beautiful neighbor. Her tone, when she spoke of her sister, seemed to import no great good will.

"So that is your opinion?" she said, after a pause. "Do you know," with a laughing glance, "that some people think I am like her?"

"Yes?" I answered gravely. "Well, I should be able to judge, who have seen you both and yet am not an old friend. And I think you are both like and unlike. Your sister has very beautiful eyes" —she lowered hers swiftly—"and hair like yours, but her manner and style were very different. I can no more fancy Bab in your place than I can picture you, Miss Guest, as I saw her for the first time—and on many after occasions," I added, laughing as much to cover my own hardihood as at the queer little figure I had conjured up.

"Thank you, Mr. Herapath," she replied with coldness, though she had blushed darkly to her ears. "That, I think, must be enough of compliments for to-night—as you are not an old friend." And she turned away, leaving me to curse my folly in saying so much, when our acquaintance was as yet in the bud, and as susceptible to overwarmth as to a temperature below zero.

A moment later the ladies left us. The flush I had brought to her cheek still lingered there, as she swept past me with a wondrous show of dignity in one

so young. Mr. Guest came down and took her place, and we talked of the "land of berries," and our adventures there, while the rest—older friends—listened indulgently or struck in from time to time with their own biggest fish and deadliest flies.

I used to wonder why women like to visit dusty chambers; why they get more joy—I am fain to think they do—out of a scrambling tea up three pairs of stairs in Pump Court, than from the very same materials—and comfort withal—in their own house. I imagine it is for the same reason that the bachelor finds a singular charm in a lady's drawing room, and there, if anywhere, sees her with a reverent mind—a charm and a subservience which I felt to the full in the Guests' drawing room—a room rich in subdued colors and a cunning blending of luxury and comfort. Yet it depressed me. I felt alone. Mr. Guest had passed on to others and I stood aside, the sense that I was not of these people troubling me in a manner as new as it was absurd: for I had been in the habit of rather despising "society." Miss Guest was at

the piano, the center of a circle of soft light, which showed up also a keen-faced, dark-whiskered man leaning over her with the air of one used to the position. Everyone else was so fully engaged that I may have looked, as well as felt, forlorn, and meeting her eyes could have fancied she was regarding me with amusement—almost triumph. It must have been mere fancy, bred of self-consciousness, for the next moment she beckoned me to her, and said to her cavalier:

"There, Jack; Mr. Herapath is going to talk to me about Norway now, so that I don't want you any longer. Perhaps you won't mind stepping up to the schoolroom — Fräulein and Clare are there—and telling Clare, that—that—oh, anything!"

There is no piece of ill-breeding so bad to my mind as for a man who is at home in a house to flaunt his favor in the face of other guests. That young lawyer's manner as he left her, and the smile of perfect intelligence which passed between them were such a breach of good manners as would have ruffled anyone. They ruffled me—yes, me, although it

was no concern of mine what she called him, or how he conducted himself—so that I could do nothing but stand by the piano and sulk. One bear makes another, you know.

She did not speak, and I, content to watch the slender hands stealing over the keys, would not, until my eyes fell upon her right wrist. She had put off her bracelets and so disclosed a scar upon it, something about which—not its newness —so startled me that I said abruptly, "That is very strange! Pray tell me how you did it!"

She looked up, saw what I meant, and, stopping hastily, put on her bracelets; to all appearance so vexed by my thoughtless question, and anxious to hide the mark, that I was quick to add humbly, "I asked because your sister hurt her wrist in nearly the same place on the day when she thought I was in trouble, and the coincidence struck me."

"Yes, I remember," looking at me I thought with a certain suspicion, as though she were not sure that I was giving the right motive. "I did this much in the same way. By falling, I

mean. Isn't it a hateful disfigurement?"

No, it was no disfigurement. Even to her, with a woman's love of conquest, it must have seemed anything but a disfigurement had she known what the quiet, awkward man at her side was thinking, who stood looking shyly at it and found no words to contradict her, though she asked him twice, and thought him stupid enough. A great longing to kiss that soft, scarred wrist was on me—and Miss Guest had added another to the number of her slaves. I don't know now why that little scar should have so touched me any more than I then could guess why, being a commonplace person, I should fall in love at first sight, and feel no surprise at my condition, only a half consciousness (seeming fully to justify it) that in some former state of being I had met my love, and read her thoughts, and learned her moods, and come to know the bright womanly spirit that looked from her frank eyes as well as if she were an old, old friend. And so vivid was this sensation, that once or twice, then and afterward, when I would meet her glance,

another name than hers trembled on my tongue and passed away before I could shape it into sound.

After an interval, "Are you going to the Goldmaces' dance?"

"No," I answered her humbly. "I go out so little."

"Indeed," with an odd smile not too kindly; "I wish—no, I don't—that we could say the same. We are engaged, I think"—she paused, her attention divided between myself and Boccherini's minuet, the low strains of which she was sending through the room—"for every afternoon—this week—except Saturday. By the way, Mr. Herapath—do you remember what was the name—Bab told me you teased her with?"

"Wee bonnie Bab," I answered absently. My thoughts had gone forward to Saturday. We are always dropping to-day's substance for the shadow of to-morrow; like the dog—a dog was it not?—in the fable.

"Oh, yes, wee bonnie Bab," she murmured softly. "Poor Bab!" and suddenly cut short Boccherini's music and our chat by striking a terrific discord and laugh-

ing merrily at my start of discomfiture. Everyone took it as a signal to leave. They all seemed to be going to meet her again next day, or the day after that; they engaged her for dances, and made up a party for the law courts, and tossed to and fro a score of laughing catch-words, that were beyond my comprehension. They all did this, except myself.

And yet I went away with something before me—that call upon Saturday afternoon. Quite unreasonably I fancied I should see her alone. And so when the day came and I stood outside the opening door of the drawing room, and heard voices and laughter within, I was hurt and aggrieved beyond measure. There was quite a party, and a merry one, assembled, who were playing at some game as it seemed to me, for I caught sight of Clare whipping off an impromptu bandage from her eyes, and striving by her stiffest air to give the lie to a pair of flushed cheeks. The black-whiskered man was there, and two men of his kind, and a German governess, and a very old lady in a wheel-chair, who was called "grandmamma," and Miss Guest herself looking,

in the prettiest dress of silvery plush, to the full as bright and fair and graceful as I had been picturing her each hour since we parted.

She dropped me a stately courtesy. "Will you play the part of Miss Carolina Wilhelmina Amelia Skeggs, Mr. Herapath, while I act honest Burchell, and say 'Fudge!' or will you burn nuts and play games with neighbor Flamborough? You will join us, won't you? Clare does not so misbehave every day, only it is such a wet afternoon and so cold and wretched, and we did not think there would be any more callers—and tea will be up in five minutes."

She did not think there would be any more callers! Something in her smile belied the words and taught me that she had thought—she had known—that there would be one more caller—one who would burn nuts and play games with her, though Rome itself were afire, and Tooley Street and the Mile End Road to boot.

It was a simple game enough, and not likely, one would say, to afford much risk of that burning the fingers which gave a zest to the Vicar of Wakefield's

nuts. One sat in the middle blind-folded, while the rest disguised their own or assumed each other's voices, and spoke one by one some gibe or quip at his expense. When he succeeded in naming the speaker, the detected satirist put on the poke, and in his turn heard things good—if he had a conceit of himself—for his soul's health. Now this *rôle* unhappily soon fell to me, and proved a heavy one, because I was not so familiar with the other's voices as were the rest; and Miss Guest—whose faintest tones I thought to have known—had a wondrous knack of cheating me, now taking off Clare's voice, and now—after the door had been opened to admit the tea—her father's. So I failed again and again to earn my release. But when a voice behind me cried with well-feigned eagerness:

"How nice! Do tell me all about a fire!"

Though no fresh creaking of the door had reached me, nor warning been given of an addition to the players, I had not the smallest doubt who was the speaker; but exclaimed at once, "That is Bab'

Now I cry you mercy. I am right this time. That was Bab!"

I looked for a burst of applause and laughter, such as had before attended a good thrust home, but none came. On the contrary, with my words so odd a silence fell upon the room that it was clear that something was wrong, and I pulled off my handkerchief in haste, repeating, "That was Bab, I am sure."

But if it was, I could not see her. What had come over them all? Jack's face wore a provoking smile, and his friends were clearly bent upon sniggering. Clare looked horrified, and grandmamma gently titillated, while Miss Guest, who had risen and half turned away toward the windows, seemed to be in a state of proud confusion. What was the matter?

"I beg everyone's pardon by anticipation," I said, looking round in a bewildered way, "but have I said anything wrong?"

"Oh, dear no!" cried the fellow they called Jack, with a familiarity that was in the worst taste—as if I had meant to apologize to him! "Most natural thing in the world!"

"Jack, how dare you!" exclaimed Miss Guest, stamping her foot.

"Well, it seemed all right. It sounded very natural, I am sure."

"Oh, you are unbearable! Why don't you say something, Clare?"

"Mr. Herapath, I am sure that you did not know that my name was Barbara."

"Certainly not," I cried. "What a strange thing!"

"But it is, and that is why grandmamma is looking so shocked, and Mr. Buchanan is wearing threadbare an old friend's privilege of being rude. I freely forgive you if you will make allowance for him. And you shall come off the stool of repentance and have your tea first, since you are the greatest stranger. It is a stupid game, after all!"

She would hear no apologies from me. And when I would have asked why her sister bore the same name, and thus excused myself, she was intent upon tea-making, and the few moments I could with decency add to my call gave me scant opportunity. I blush to think how I eked them out, by what subservience to Clare, by what a slavish anxiety to help

even Jack to muffins—each piece I hoped might choke him. How slow I was to find hat and gloves, calling to mind with terrible vividness, as I turned my back upon the circle, that again and again in my experience an acquaintance begun by a dinner had ended with the consequent cail. And so I should have gone—it might have been so here—but that the door-handle was stiff, and Miss Guest came to my aid as I fumbled with it. "We are always at home on Saturdays, if you like to call, Mr. Herapath," she murmured carelessly, not lifting her eyes—and I found myself in the street.

So carelessly she said it that, with a sudden change of feeling, I vowed I would not call. Why should I? Why should I worry myself with the sight of those other fellows parading their favor? With the babble of that society chit-chat, which I had so often scorned, and—and still scorned, and had no part or concern in. They were not people to suit me or do me good. I would not go, I said, and repeated it firmly on Monday and Tuesday; on Wednesday only so far modified it that I thought at some distant time to

leave a card—to avoid discourtesy; on Friday preferred an earlier date as wiser and more polite, and on Saturday walked shame-faced down the street, and knocked and rang and went upstairs—to taste a pleasant misery. Yes, and on the next Saturday too, and the next, and the next; and that one on which we all went to the theater, and that other one on which Mr. Guest kept me to dinner. Aye, and on other days that were not Saturdays, among which two stand high out of the waters of forgetfulness—high days, indeed—days like twin pillars of Hercules, through which I thought to reach, as did the seamen of old, I knew not what treasures of unknown lands stretching away under the setting sun. First that one on which I found Barbara Guest alone and blurted out that I had the audacity to wish to make her my wife; and then heard, before I had well—or badly—told my tale, the wheels of grandmamma's chair outside.

"Hush!" the girl said, her face turned from me. "Hush, Mr. Herapath! You don't know me, indeed. You have seen so little of me. Please say nothing more

about it. You are completely under a delusion."

"It is no delusion that I love you, Barbara!" I cried.

"It is! it is!" she repeated, freeing her hand. "There, if you will not take an answer—come—come at three to-morrow. But mind, I promise you nothing—I promise nothing," she added feverishly, and fled from the room, leaving me to talk to grandmamma as best, and escape as quickly as, I might.

I longed for a great fire that evening, and, failing one, tired myself by tramping unknown streets of the East End, striving to teach myself that any trouble to-morrow might bring was but a shadow, a sentiment, a thing not to be mentioned in the same breath with the want and toil of which I caught glimpses up each street and lane that opened to right and left. In the main, of course, I failed; but the effort did me good, sending me home tired out, to sleep as soundly as if I were going to be hanged next day, and not—which is a very different thing—to be put upon my trial.

"I will tell Miss Guest you are here,

sir," the man said. I looked at all the little things in the room which I had come to know well—her work basket, the music upon the piano, the table easel, her photograph, and wondered if I were to see them no more, or if they were to become a part of my everyday life. Then I heard her come in, and turned quickly, feeling that I should learn my fate from her greeting.

"Bab!" The word was wrung from me perforce. And then we stood and looked at one another, she with a strange pride and defiance in her eyes, though her cheek was dark with blushes, and I with wonder and perplexity in mine. Wonder and perplexity that quickly grew into a conviction, a certainty that the girl standing before me in the short-skirted brown dress with tangled hair and loose neck-ribbon was the Bab I had known in Norway; and yet that the eyes—I could not mistake them now, no matter what unaccustomed look they might wear—were Barbara Guest's!

"Miss Guest—Barbara," I stammered, grappling with the truth, "why have you played this trick upon me?"

"It is Miss Guest and Barbara now," she cried, with a mocking courtesy. "Do you remember, Mr. Herapath, when it was Bab? When you treated me as a kind of toy and a plaything, with which you might be as intimate as you liked; and hurt my feelings—yes, it is weak to confess it, I know—day by day and hour by hour?"

"But, surely, that is forgiven now?" I said, dazed by an attack so sudden and so bitter. "It is atonement enough that I am at your feet now, Barbara!"

"You are not," she retorted hotly. "Don't say you have offered love to me, who am the same with the child you teased at Breistolen. You have fallen in love with my fine clothes and my pearls and my maid's work, not with me! You have fancied the girl you saw other men make much of. But you have not loved the woman who might have prized that which Miss Guest has never learned to value."

"How old are you?" I said hoarsely.

"Nineteen!" she snapped out. And then for a moment we were both silent.

"I begin to understand now," I an-

swered slowly as soon as I could conquer something in my throat. "Long ago, when I hardly knew you, I hurt your woman's pride; and since that you have plotted——"

"No, you have tricked yourself!"

"And schemed to bring me to your feet that you might have the pleasure of trampling on me. Miss Guest, your triumph is complete, more complete than you are able to understand. I loved you this morning above all the world—as my own life—as every hope I had. See, I tell you this that you may have a moment's keener pleasure when I am gone."

"Don't! Don't!" she cried, throwing herself into a chair and covering her face.

"You have won a man's heart and cast it aside to gratify an old pique. You may rest content now, for there is nothing wanting to your vengeance. You have given me as much pain as a woman, the vainest and the most heartless, can give a man. Good-by."

And with that I was leaving her, fighting my own pain and passion, so that the little hands she raised as though they would ward off my words were nothing to

me. I felt a savage delight in seeing that I could hurt her, which deadened my own grief. The victory was not all with her lying there sobbing. Only where was my hat? Let me get my hat and go. Let me escape from this room wherein every trifle upon which my eye rested awoke some memory that was a pang. Let me get away, and have done with it all.

Where was the hat? I had brought it up. I could not go without it. It must be under her chair, by all that was unlucky, for it was nowhere else. I could not stand and wait, and so I had to go up to her, with cold words of apology upon my lips, and being close to her and seeing on her wrist, half hidden by fallen hair, the scar she had brought home from Norway, I don't know how it was that I fell on my knees by her and cried:

"Oh, Bab, I loved you so! Let us part friends."

For a moment, silence. Then she whispered, her hand in mine: "Why did you not say Bab to begin? I only told you that Miss Guest had not learned to value your love."

"And Bab?" I murmured, my brain in a whirl.

"Learned long ago, poor girl!"

And the fair, tear-stained face of my tyrant looked into mine for a moment, and then came quite naturally to its resting place.

"Now," she said, when I was leaving, "you may have your hat, sir."

"I believe," I replied, "that you sat upon this chair on purpose."

And Bab blushed. I believe she did.

THE DRIFT OF FATE.

ON a certain morning in last June I was stooping to fasten a shoe-lace, having taken advantage for the purpose of the step of a corner house in St. James' Square, when a man passing behind me stopped.

"Well!" said he aloud, after a short pause during which I wondered—I could not see him—what he was doing, "the meanness of these rich folk is disgusting! Not a coat of paint for a twelvemonth! I should be ashamed to own a house and leave it like that!"

The man was a stranger to me, and his words seemed as uncalled for as they were ill-natured. But being thus challenged I looked at the house. It was a great stone mansion with a balustrade atop, with many windows and a long stretch of area railings. And, certainly it was shabby.

I turned from it to the critic. He was shabby, too—a little red-nosed man, wearing a bad hat. "It is just possible," I suggested, "that the owner may be a poor man and unable to keep it in order."

"Ugh! What has that to do with it?" my new friend answered contemptuously. "He ought to think of the public."

"And your hat?" I asked, with wining politeness. "It strikes me, an unprejudiced observer, as a bad hat. Why do you not get a new one?"

"Cannot afford it!" he snapped out, his dull eyes sparkling with rage.

"Cannot afford it? But, my good man, you ought to think of the public."

"You tom-cat! What have you to do with my hat? Smother you!" was his kindly answer; and he went on his way muttering things uncomplimentary.

I was about to go mine, and was first falling back to gain a better view of the house in question, when a chuckle close to me betrayed the presence of a listener, a thin, gray-haired man, who, hidden by a pillar of the porch, must have heard our discussion. His hands were engaged with a white tablecloth, from which he

had been shaking the crumbs. He had the air of an upper servant of the best class. As our eyes met he spoke.

"Neatly put, sir, if I may take the liberty of saying so," he observed with a quiet dignity it was a pleasure to witness, "and we are very much obliged to you. The man was a snob, sir."

"I am afraid he was," I answered; "and a fool too."

"And a fool, sir. Answer a fool after his folly. You did that, and he was nowhere; nowhere at all, except in the swearing line. Now might I ask," he continued, "if you are an American, sir?"

"No, I am not," I answered; "but I have spent some time in the States."

I could have fancied that he sighed.

"I thought—but never mind, sir," he began, "I was wrong. It is curious how very much alike gentlemen, that are real gentlemen, speak. Now, I dare swear, sir, that you have a taste for pictures."

I was inclined to humor the old fellow's mood. "I like a good picture, I admit," I said.

"Then perhaps you would not be offended if I asked you to step inside and

look at one or two," he suggested timidly. "I would not take a liberty, sir, but there are some Van Dycks and a Rubens in the dining room that cost a mint of money in their day, I have heard; and there is no one else in the house but my wife and myself."

It was a strange invitation, strangely brought about. But I saw no reason for myself why I should not accept it, and I followed him into the hall. It was spacious, but sparsely furnished. The matted floor had a cold look, and so had the gaunt stand which seemed to be a fixture, and boasted but one umbrella, one sunshade, and one dog-whip. As I passed a half-open door I caught a glimpse of a a small room prettily furnished, with dainty prints and water-colors on the walls. But these were of a common order. A dozen replicas of each and all might be seen in a walk through Bond Street. Even this oasis of taste and comfort told the same story as had the bare hall and dreary exterior; and laid, as it were, a finger on one's heart. I trod softly as I followed my guide along the strip of matting toward the rear of the house.

He opened a door at the inner end of the hall, and led me into a large and lofty room, built out from the back, as a state dining room or ballroom. At present it rather resembled the latter, for it was without furniture. "Now," said the old man, turning and respectfully touching my sleeve to gain my attention, "now you will not consider your labor lost in coming to see that, sir. It is a portrait of the second Lord Wetherby by Sir Anthony Van Dyck, and is judged to be one of the finest specimens of his style in existence."

I was lost in astonishment; amazed, almost appalled! My companion stood by my side, his face wearing a placid smile of satisfaction, his hand pointing slightly upward to the blank wall before us. The blank wall! Of any picture, there or elsewhere in the room, there was no sign. I turned to him and then from him, and I felt very sick at heart. The poor old fellow was—must be—mad. I gazed blankly at the blank wall. "By Van Dyck?" I repeated mechanically.

"Yes, sir, by Van Dyck," he replied, in the most matter-of-fact tone imaginable. "So, too, is this one;" he moved, as he

spoke, a few feet to his left. "The second peer's first wife in the costume of a lady-in-waiting. This portrait and the last are in as good a state of preservation as on the day they were painted."

Oh, certainly mad! And yet so graphic was his manner, so crisp and realistic were his words, that I rubbed my eyes; and looked and looked again, and almost fancied that Lord Walter and Anne, his wife, grew into shape before me on the wall. Almost, but not quite; and it was with a heart full of wondering pity that I accompanied the old man, in whose manner there was no trace of wildness or excitement, round the walls; visiting in turn the Cuyp which my lord bought in Holland, the Rubens, the four Lawrences, and the Philips—a very Barmecide feast of art. I could not doubt that the old man saw the pictures. But I saw only bare walls.

"Now I think you have seen them, family portraits and all," he concluded, as we came to the doorway again; stating the fact, which was no fact, with complacent pride. "They are fine pictures, sir. They, at least, are left, although the house is not what it was."

"Very fine pictures!" I remarked. I was minded to learn if he were sane on other points. "Lord Wetherby," I said; "I should suppose that he is not in London?"

"I do not know, sir, one way or the other," the servant answered with a new air of reserve. "This is not his lordship's house. Mrs. Wigram, my late lord's daughter-in-law, lives here."

"But this is the Wetherbys' town house," I persisted. I knew so much.

"It was my late lord's house. At his son's marriage it was settled upon Mrs. Wigram; and little enough besides, God knows!" he exclaimed querulously. "It was Mr. Alfred's wish that some land should be settled upon his wife, but there was none out of the entail, and my lord, who did not like the match, though he lived to be fond enough of the mistress afterward, said, 'Settle the house in town!' in a bitter kind of joke like. So the house was settled, and five hundred pounds a year. Mr. Alfred died abroad, as you may know, sir, and my lord was not long in following him."

He was closing the shutters of one win-

dow after another as he spoke. The room had sunk into deep gloom. I could imagine now that the pictures were really where he fancied them. "And Lord Wetherby, the late peer?" I asked, after a pause, "did he leave his daughter-in-law nothing?"

"My lord died suddenly, leaving no will," he replied sadly. "That is how it all is. And the present peer, who was only a second cousin—well, I say nothing about him." A reticence which was well calculated to consign his lordship to the lowest deep.

"He did not help?" I asked.

"Devil a bit, begging your pardon, sir. But there—it is not my place to talk of these things. I doubt I have wearied you with talk about the family. It is not my way," he added, as if wondering at himself, "only something in what you said seemed to touch a chord like."

By this time we were outside the room, standing at the inner end of the hall, while he fumbled with the lock of the door. Short passages ending in swing doors ran out right and left from this point, and through one of these a tidy,

middle-aged woman, wearing an apron, suddenly emerged. At sight of me she looked greatly astonished. "I have been showing the gentleman the pictures," said my guide, who was still occupied with the door.

A quick flash of pain altered and hardened the woman's face. "I have been very much interested, madam," I said softly.

Her gaze left me, to dwell upon the old man with infinite affection. "John had no right to bring you in, sir," she said primly. "I have never known him do such a thing before, and—Lord 'a' mercy! there is the mistress's knock. Go, John, and let her in; and this gentleman," with an inquisitive look at me, "will not mind stepping a bit aside, while her ladyship goes upstairs."

"Certainly not," I answered. I hastened to draw back into one of the side passages, into the darkest corner of it, and there stood leaning against the cool panels, my hat in my hand.

In the short pause which ensued before John opened the door she whispered to me, "You have not told him, sir?"

"About the pictures?"

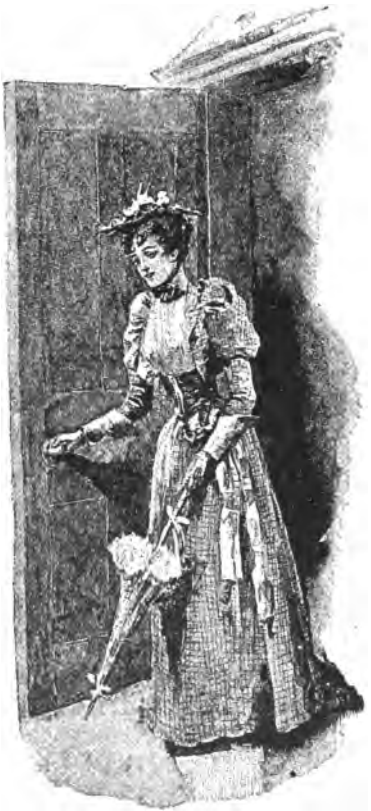
"Yes, sir. He is blind, you see."

"Blind?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, sir, this year and more; and when the pictures were taken away—by the present earl—that he had known all his life, and been so proud to show to people just the same as if they had been his own—why, it seemed a shame to tell him. I have never had the heart to do it, and he thinks they are there to this day."

Blind! I had never thought of that; and while I was grasping the idea now, and fitting it to the facts, a light footstep sounded in the hall and a woman's voice on the stairs; such a voice and such a footstep, that, as it seemed to me, a man, if nothing else were left to him, might find home in them alone. "Your mistress," I said presently, when the sounds had died away upon the floor above, "has a sweet voice; but has not something annoyed her?"

"Well, I never should have thought that you would have noticed that!" exclaimed the housekeeper, who was, I dare say, many other things besides housekeeper. "You have a sharp ear, sir; that



"LORD 'A' MERCY! THERE IS THE MISTRESS'S KNOCK."

I will say. Yes, there is a something has gone wrong; but to think that an American gentleman should have noticed it!"

"I am not American," I said, perhaps testily.

"Oh, indeed, sir. I beg your pardon, I am sure. It was just your way of speaking made me think it," she replied; and then there came a second louder rap at the door, as John, who had gone upstairs with his mistress, came down in a leisurely fashion.

"That is Lord Wetherby, drat him!" he said, on his wife calling to him in a low voice; he was ignorant, I think, of my presence. "He is to be shown into the library, and the mistress will see him there in five minutes; and you are to go to her room. Oh, rap away!" he added, turning toward the door, and shaking his fist at it. "There is many a better man than you has waited longer at that door."

"Hush, John! Do you not see the gentleman?" interposed his wife, with the simplicity of habit. "He will show you out," she added rapidly to me, "as soon as his lordship has gone in, if you do not mind waiting another minute."

"Not at all," I said, drawing back into the corner as they went on their errands; but though I said, "Not at all," mine was an odd position. The way in which I had come into the house, and my present situation in a kind of hiding, would have made most men only anxious to extricate themselves. But I, while listening to John parleying with someone at the door, conceived a strange desire, or a desire which would have been strange in any other man, to see this thing to the end; conceived it and acted upon it.

The library? That was the room on the right of the hall, opposite to Mrs. Wigram's sitting room. Probably, nay I was certain, it had another door opening on the passage in which I stood. It would cost me but a step or two to confirm my opinion. When John ushered in the visitor by one door I had already, by way of the other, ensconced myself behind a screen, that I seemed to know would face it. I was going to listen. Perhaps I had my reasons. Perhaps—but there, what matter? I, as a fact, listened.

The room was spacious but somber, wainscoted and vaulted with oak. Its

only visible occupant was a thin, dark man of middle size, with a narrow face, and a stubborn feather of black hair rising above his forehead; a man of Welsh type. He was standing with his back to the light, a roll of papers in one hand. The fingers of the other, drumming upon the table, betrayed that he was both out of temper and ill at ease. While I was still scanning him stealthily—I had never seen him before—the door was opened, and Mrs. Wigram came in. I sank back behind the screen. I think some words passed, some greeting of the most formal, but though the room was still, I failed to hear it, and when I recovered myself he was speaking.

"I am here at your wish, Mrs. Wigram, and your service, too," he was saying, with an effort at gallantry which sat very ill upon him, "although I think it would have been better if we had left the matter to our solicitors."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. I fancied you were aware of my opinion."

"I was; and I perfectly understand, Lord Wetherby, your preference for that course," she replied, with sarcastic cold-

ness, which did not hide her dislike for him. "You naturally shrink from telling me your terms face to face."

"Now, Mrs. Wigram! Now, Mrs. Wigram! Is not this a tone to be deprecated?" he answered, lifting his hands. "I come to you as a man of business upon business."

"Business! Does that mean wringing advantage from my weakness?" she retorted.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I do deprecate this tone," he repeated. "I come in plain English to make you an offer; one which you can accept or refuse as you please. I offer you five hundred a year for this house. It is immensely too large for your needs, and too expensive for your income, and yet you have in strictness no power to let it. Very well, I, who can release you from that restriction, offer you five hundred a year for the house. What can be more fair?"

"Fair? In plain English, Lord Wetherby, you are the only possible purchaser, and you fix the price. Is that fair? The house would let easily for twelve hundred."

"Possibly," he retorted, "if it were in the open market. But it is not."

"No," she answered rapidly. "And you, having the forty thousand a year which, had my husband lived, would have been his and mine; you who, a poor man, have stepped into this inheritance—you offer me five hundred for the family house! For shame, my lord! for shame!"

"We are not acting a play," he said doggedly, showing that her words had stung him in some degree. "The law is the law. I ask for nothing but my rights, and one of those I am willing to waive in your favor. You have my offer."

"And if I refuse it? If I let the house? You will not dare to enforce the restriction."

"Try me," he rejoined, again drumming with his fingers upon the table. "Try me, and you will see."

"If my husband had lived——"

"But he did not live," he broke in, losing patience, "and that makes all the difference. Now, for Heaven's sake, Mrs. Wigram, do not make a scene! Do you accept my offer?"

For a moment she had seemed about to

break down, but her pride coming to the rescue, she recovered herself with wonderful quickness.

"I have no choice," she said, with dignity.

"I am glad you accept," he answered, so much relieved that he gave way to an absurd burst of generosity. "Come!" he cried, "we will say guineas instead of pounds, and have done with it!"

She looked at him in wonder. "No, Lord Wetherby," she said, "I accepted your terms. I prefer to keep to them. You said that you would bring the necessary papers with you. If you have done so I will sign them now, and my servants can witness them."

"I have the draft, and the lawyer's clerk is no doubt in the house," he answered. "I left directions for him to be here at eleven."

"I do not think he is in the house," the lady answered. "I should know if he were here."

"Not here!" he cried angrily. "Why not, I wonder! But I have the skeleton lease. It is very short, and to save delay I will fill in the particulars, names, and so

forth myself, if you will permit me to do so. It will not take me twenty minutes."

"As you please. You will find a pen and ink on the table. If you will kindly ring the bell when you are ready, I will come and bring the servants."

"Thank you; you are very good," he said smoothly; adding, when she had left the room. "And the devil take your impudence, madam! As for your cursed pride—well, it has saved me twenty-five pounds a year, and so you are welcome to it. I was a fool to make the offer." And with that, now grumbling at the absence of the lawyer's clerk and now congratulating himself on the saving of a lawyer's fee, my lord sat down to his task.

A hansom cab on its way to the East India Club rattled through the square, and under cover of the noise I stole out from behind the screen, and stood in the middle of the room, looking down at the unconscious worker. If for a minute I felt strongly the desire to raise my hand and give his lordship such a surprise as he had never in his life experienced, any other man might have felt the same; and,

as it was, I put it away and only looked quietly about me. Some rays of sunshine, piercing the corner pane of a dulled window, fell on and glorified the Wetherby coat of arms blazoned over the wide fireplace, and so created the one bright spot in the bare, dismantled room, which had once, unless the tiers of empty shelves and the yet lingering odor of Russia lied, been lined from floor to ceiling with books. My lord had taken the furniture; my lord had taken the books; my lord had taken—nothing but his rights.

Retreating softly to the door by which I had entered, and rattling the handle, I advanced afresh into the room. "Will your lordship allow me?" I said, after I had in vain coughed twice to gain his attention.

He turned hastily and looked at me with a face full of suspicion. Some surprise on finding another person in the room and close to him was natural; but possibly, also, there was something in the atmosphere of that house which threw his nerves off their balance. "Who are you?" he cried, in a tone which matched his face.

"You left orders, my lord," I explained, "with Messrs. Duggan & Poole that a clerk should attend here at eleven. I very much regret that some delay has unavoidably been caused."

"Oh, you are the clerk!" he replied ungraciously. "You do not look much like a lawyer's clerk."

Involuntarily I glanced aside and saw in a mirror the reflection of a tall man with a thick beard and mustaches, gray eyes, and an ugly scar seaming the face from ear to ear. "Yet I hope to give you full satisfaction, my lord," I murmured, dropping my eyes. "It was understood that you needed a confidential clerk."

"Well, well, sir, to your work!" he replied irritably. "Better late than never. And after all it may be preferable for you to be here and see it duly executed. Only you will not forget," he continued hastily, with a glance at the papers, "that I have myself copied four—well, three—three full folios, sir, for which an allowance must be made. But there! Get on with your work. The handwriting will speak for itself."

I obeyed, and wrote on steadily, while the earl walked up and down the room, or stood at a window. Upstairs sat Mrs. Wigram, schooling herself, I dare swear, to take this one favor that was no favor from the man who had dealt out to her such hard measure. Outside a casual passer through the square glanced up at the great house, and seeing the bent head of the secretary and the figure of his companion moving to and fro, saw, as he thought, nothing unusual; nor had any presentiment—how should he?—of the strange scene which the room with the dingy windows was about to witness.

I had been writing for perhaps five minutes when Lord Wetherby stopped in his passage behind me and looked over my shoulder. With a jerk his eye-glasses fell, touching my shoulder.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed, "I have seen your handwriting somewhere; and lately too. Where could it have been?"

"Probably among the family papers, my lord," I answered. "I have several times been engaged in the family business in the time of the late Lord Wetherby."

"Indeed!" There were both curiosity and suspicion in his utterance of the word. "You knew him?"

"Yes, my lord. I have written for him in this very room, and he has walked up and down, and dictated to me, as you might be doing now," I explained.

His lordship stopped his pacing to and fro, and retreated to the window on the instant. But I could see that he was interested, and I was not surprised when he continued, with transparent carelessness, "A strange coincidence! And may I ask what it was upon which you were engaged?"

"At that time?" I answered, looking him in the face. "It was a will, my lord."

He started and frowned, and abruptly resumed his walk up and down. But I saw that he had a better conscience than I had given him the credit of possessing. My shot had not struck fairly where I had looked to place it; and finding this was so, I turned the thing over afresh, while I pursued my copying. When I had finished, I asked him—I think he was busy at the time cursing the absence of tact in the lower orders—if he would go

through the instrument; and he took my seat.

Where I stood behind him, I was not far from the fireplace. While he muttered to himself the legal jargon in which he was as well versed as a lawyer bred in an office, I moved to it; and, neither missed nor suspected, stood looking from his bent figure to the blazoned shield which formed part of the mantelpiece. If I wavered, my hesitation lasted but a few seconds. Then, raising my voice, I called sharply, "My lord, there used to be here——"

He turned swiftly, and saw where I was.

"What the deuce are you doing there, sir?" he cried, in boundless astonishment, rising to his feet and coming toward me, the pen in his hand and his face aflame with anger. "You forget——"

"A safe—a concealed safe for papers," I continued, cutting him short in my turn. "I have seen the late Lord Wetherby place papers in it more than once. The spring worked from here. You touch this knob——"

"Leave it alone, sir!" cried the peer furiously.

He spoke too late. The shield had

swung gently outward on a hinge, door-fashion, and where it had been gaped a small open safe, lined with cement. The rays of sunshine, that a few minutes before had picked out so brightly the gaudy quarterings, now fell on a large envelope which lay apart on a shelf. It was as clean as if it had been put there that morning. No doubt the safe was air-tight. I laid my hand upon it. "My lord!" I cried, turning to look at him with ill-concealed exultation, "here is a paper—I think, a will!"

A moment before the veins of his forehead had been swollen, his face dark with the rush of blood. His anger died down, at sight of the packet, with strange abruptness. He regained his self-control, and a moment saw him pale and calm, all show of resentment confined to a wicked gleam in his eye. "A will!" he repeated, with a certain kind of dignity, though the hand he stretched out to take the envelope shook. "Indeed! Then it is my place to examine it. I am the heir-at-law, and I am within my rights, sir."

I feared that he was going to put the parcel into his pocket and dismiss me, and

I was considering what course I should take in that event, when instead he carried the envelope to the table by the window, and tore off the cover without ceremony. "It is not in your handwriting?" were his first words, and he looked at me with a distrust that was almost superstitious. No doubt my sudden entrance, my ominous talk, and my discovery seemed to him to savor of the devil.

"No," I replied, unmoved. "I told your lordship that I had written a will at the late Lord Wetherby's dictation. I did not say—for how could I know?—that it was this one."

"Ah!" He hastily smoothed the sheets, and ran his eyes over their contents. When he reached the last page there was a dark scowl on his face, and he stood a while staring at the signatures; not now reading, I think, but collecting his thoughts. "You know the provisions of this?" he presently burst forth with violence, dashing the back of his hand against the paper. "I say, sir, you know the provisions of this?"

"I do not, my lord," I answered. Nor did I.

"The unjust provisions of this will!" he repeated, passing over my negative as if it had not been uttered. "Fifty thousand pounds to a woman who had not a penny when she married his son! Ay, and the interest on another hundred thousand for her life! Why, it is a prodigious income, an abnormal income, for a woman! And out of whose pocket is it to come? Out of mine, every stiver of it! It is monstrous! I say it is! How am I to keep up the title on the income left to me, I should like to know?"

I marveled. I remembered how rich he was. I could not refrain from suggesting that he had still remaining all the real property. "And," I added, "I understood, my lord, that the testator's personalty was sworn under four hundred thousand pounds."

"You talk nonsense!" he snarled. "Look at the legacies! Five thousand here, and a thousand there, and hundreds like berries on a bush! It is a fortune, a decent fortune, clean frittered away! A barren title is all that will be left to me!"

What was he going to do? His face was gloomy, his hands were twitching.

"Who are the witnesses, my lord?" I asked, in a low voice.

So low—for, under certain conditions, a tone conveys much, very much—that he shot a stealthy glance toward the door before he answered, "John Williams."

"Blind," I replied, in the same low tone.

"William Williams."

"He is dead. He was Mr. Alfred's valet. I remember reading in the newspaper that he was with his master, and was killed by the Indians at the same time."

"True. I remember that that was the case," he answered huskily. "And the handwriting is Lord Wetherby's." I assented. Then for fully a minute we were silent, while he bent over the will, and I stood behind him looking down at him, with thoughts in my mind which he could as little fathom as could the senseless wood upon which I leaned. Yet I, too, mistook him. I thought him, to be plain, a scoundrel; and—well, so he was, but a mean one. "What is to be done?" he muttered at length, speaking rather to himself than to me.

I answered softly, "I am a poor man, my lord," while inwardly I was quoting, "*Quem Deus vult perdere.*"

My words startled him. He answered hurriedly: "Just so! just so! So shall I be when this cursed paper takes effect. A very poor man! A hundred and fifty thousand gone at a blow! But there, she shall have it! She shall have every penny of it; only," he continued slowly, "I do not see what difference one more day will make."

I followed his downcast eyes, which moved from the will before him to the agreement for the lease of the house; and I did see what difference a day would make. I saw and understood and wondered. He had not the courage to suppress the will; but if he could gain a slight advantage by withholding it for a few hours, he had the mind to do that. Mrs. Wigram, a rich woman, would no longer let the house; she would be under no compulsion to do so; and my lord would lose a cheap residence as well as his hundred and fifty thousand pounds. To the latter loss he could resign himself with a sigh; but he could not bear to

forego the petty gain for which he had schemed. "I think I understand, my lord," I replied.

"Of course," he resumed nervously, "you must be rewarded for making this discovery. I will see that it is so. You may depend upon me. I will mention the case to Mrs. Wigram, and—and, in fact, my friend, you may depend upon me."

"That will not do," I said firmly. "If that be all, I had better go to Mrs. Wigram at once, and claim my reward a day earlier."

He grew very red in the face at receiving this check. "You will not, in that event, get my good word," he said.

"Which has no weight with the lady," I answered politely but plainly.

"How dare you speak so to me?" his lordship cried. "You are an impertinent fellow! But there! How much do you want?"

"A hundred pounds."

"A hundred pounds for a mere day's delay, which will do no one any harm!"

"Except Mrs. Wigram," I retorted dryly. "Come, Lord Wetherby, this lease is worth a thousand a year to you.

Mrs. Wigram, as you well know, will not voluntarily let the house to you. If you would have Wetherby House you must pay me. That is the long and the short of it."

"You are an impertinent fellow!" he repeated.

"So you have said before, my lord."

I expected him to burst into a furious passion, but I suppose there was a something of power in my tone, beyond the mere defiance which the words expressed; for, instead of doing so, he eyed me with a thoughtful, malevolent gaze, and paused to consider. "You are at Duggan & Poole's," he said slowly. "How was it that they did not search this cupboard, with which you were acquainted?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I have not been in the house since Lord Wetherby died," I said. "My employers did not consult me when the papers he left were examined."

"You are not a member of the firm?"

"No, I am not," I answered. I was thinking that, so far as I knew those respectable gentlemen, no one of them would have helped my lord in this for

ten times a hundred pounds. My lord! Faugh!

He seemed satisfied, and taking out a notecase laid on the table a little pile of notes. "There is your money," he said, counting them over with reluctant fingers. "Be good enough to put the will and envelope back into the cupboard. To-morrow you will oblige me by rediscovering it—you can manage that, no doubt—and giving information at once to Messrs. Duggan & Poole, or Mrs. Wigram, as you please. Now," he continued, when I had obeyed him, "will you be good enough to ask the servants to tell Mrs. Wigram that I am waiting?"

There was a slight noise behind us. "I am here," said someone. I am sure that we both jumped at the sound, for though I did not look that way, I knew that the voice was Mrs. Wigram's, and that she was in the room. "I have come to tell you, Lord Wetherby," she went on, "that I have an engagement from home at twelve. Do I understand, however, that you are ready? If so, I will call in Mrs. Williams."

"The papers are ready for signature,"

the peer answered, betraying some confusion, "and I am ready to sign. I shall be glad to have the matter settled as agreed." Then he turned to me, where I had fallen back, as seemed becoming, to the end of the room, and said, "Be good enough to ring the bell, if Mrs. Wigram permit it."

As I moved to the fireplace to do so, I was conscious that the lady was regarding me with some faint surprise. But when I had regained my position and looked toward her, she was standing near the window, gazing steadily out into the square, an expression of disdain rendered by face and figure. Shall I confess that it was a joy to me to see her fair head so high, and to read, even in the outline of her girlish form, a contempt which I, and I only, knew to be so justly based? For myself, I leaned against the edge of the screen by the door, and perhaps my hundred pounds lay heavily on my heart. As for him, he fidgeted with his papers, although they were all in order, and was visibly impatient to get his bit of knavery accomplished. Oh, he was a worthy man! And Welshman!

"Perhaps," he presently suggested, for the sake of saying something, "while your servant is coming, you will read the agreement, Mrs. Wigram. It is very short, and, as you know, your solicitors have already seen it in the draft."

She bowed, and took the paper negligently. She read some way down the first sheet with a smile, half careless, half contemptuous. Then I saw her stop—she had turned her back to the window to obtain more light—and dwell on a particular sentence. I saw—God! I had forgotten the handwriting!—I saw her gray eyes grow large, and fear leap into them, as she grasped the paper with her other hand, and stepped nearer to the peer's side. "Who?" she cried. "Who wrote this? Tell me! Do you hear? Tell me quickly!"

He was nervous on his own account, wrapped in his own piece of scheming, and obtuse.

"I wrote it," he said, with maddening complacency. He put up his glasses and glanced at the top of the page she held out to him. "I wrote it myself, and I can assure you that it is quite

right, and a faithful copy. You do not think——"

"Think! think! No! no. This, I mean! Who wrote this?" she cried, awe in her face, and a suppliant tone, strange as addressed to that man, in her voice.

He was confounded by her vehemence, as well as hampered by his own evil conscience.

"The clerk, Mrs. Wigram, the clerk," he said petulantly, still in his fog of selfishness. "The clerk from Messrs. Duggan & Poole's."

"Where is he?" she cried out breathlessly. I think she did not believe him.

"Where is he?" he repeated, in querulous surprise. "Why here, of course. Where should he be, madam? He will witness my signature."

Would he? Signatures! It was little of signatures I recked at that moment. I was praying to Heaven that my folly might be forgiven me; and that my lightly planned vengeance might not fall on my own head. "Joy does not kill," I was saying to myself, repeating it over and over again, and clinging to it desperately. "Joy does not kill!" But oh!

was it true? in face of that white-lipped woman!

"Here!" She did not say more, but gazing at me with great dazed eyes, she raised her hand and beckoned to me. And I had no choice but to obey; to go nearer to her, out into the light.

"Mrs. Wigram," I said hoarsely, my voice sounding to me only as a whisper, "I have news of your late—of your husband. It is good news."

"Good news?" Did she faintly echo my words? or, as her face, from which all color had passed, peered into mine, and searched it in infinite hope and infinite fear, did our two minds speak without need of physical lips? "Good news?"

"Yes," I whispered. "He is alive. The Indians did not——"

"Alfred!" Her cry rang through the room, and with it I caught her in my arms as she fell. Beard and long hair, and scar and sunburn, and strange dress—these which had deceived others were no disguise to her—my wife. I bore her gently to the couch, and hung over her in a new paroxysm of fear. "A doctor! Quick! A doctor!" I cried to Mrs. Williams, who

was already kneeling beside her. "Do not tell me," I added piteously, "that I have killed her!"

"No! no! no!" the good woman answered, the tears running down her face. "Joy does not kill!"

An hour later this fear had been lifted from me, and I was walking up and down the library alone with my thankfulness; glad to be alone, yet more glad, more thankful still, when John came in with a beaming face. "You have come to tell me," I cried eagerly, pleased that the tidings had come by his lips, "to go to her? That she will see me?"

"Her ladyship is sitting up," he replied.

"And Lord Wetherby?" I asked, pausing at the door to put the question. "He left the house at once?"

"Yes, my lord, Mr. Wigram has been gone some time."

A BLORE MANOR EPISODE.

NOT very remarkable was this courtship: there was nothing very strange about it, or more romantic than is apt to be the case with such things. I doubt not that since the daughters of the children of men were wooed, there have been many millions of such May-time passages of greater interest, and that countless Pauls and Virginias have plucked the sweet spring flowers together amid more picturesque surroundings. Every matron—and some maids, if they will, though we deprecate the omen—can recall at least one wooing which she can vouch as a thousand million times more extraordinary than that of my commonplace hero and heroine. That is so: but for that very reason let her read of this one, and taking off the cover of her

own potpourri savor some faint scent of the dewy roses of the past spring-time.

It had its origin in the 12:10 down train from Euston to Holyhead, which carried, among other passengers, Charles Maitland of the Temple, barrister by theory and idler by, or for want of, practice. He traveled first-class. When you come to know him better you will understand how superfluous was this last piece of information. Ten minutes before the train was due out, he arrived at the station in a hansom. A silk hat, a well-fitting light overcoat—the weather, for March, was mild — gray trousers, and brown gaiters over his patent-leather boots were the most salient details of a costume of which the chief characteristic was an air of perfect correctness. At the bookstall he did not linger, culling with loving eyes the backs of many books, and reveling in his choice with florin in hand, as do second-class passengers, but without hesitation he purchased a *Saturday Review* and a *Cornhill Magazine*. After he had taken his seat a Smith's boy invited him to select from a tray, upon which

glowed half a dozen novels; but he gazed sublimely into vacancy over the boy's head; who soon left him, and prompted by a vengeful spirit only inferior to his precocious knowledge of passenger nature, directed upon him the attacks of two kindred sprites with Banbury cakes and British sherry. The window was slight protection against their shrill voices, but soon the train started and freed him from them. He changed his hat for a brown deer-stalker, and having the compartment to himself, had recourse to his own thoughts. It was not unlikely, he told himself, that he had been precipitate in undertaking this journey. An Easter, coming somewhat early, seemed to have forestalled his wonted invitations for that season: and, to stay in London being out of the question, he had accepted Tom Quaritch's offer. He began to have doubts of the wisdom of this course now, but it was too late. He was bound for Tom Quaritch's. He had known something of Tom at college; and recently he had done him a slight service in town. No more genial soul than the latter existed, and he did not rest satisfied until

he had won from Maitland a half promise to come and see his beagles at Easter. At the time our traveler had but the remotest idea of doing so. He did not know enough of Tom's people, while to have the acquaintance of the right people and of no one else was part of his creed. But now he was between the horns of a dilemma. These people, of whom he knew nothing, might not be the right people; that was one horn. The other consisted in the fact that to spend a vacation in town was not the thing. When we have chosen our horn it is natural it should seem the sharper of the two. Mr. Charles Maitland frowned as he cut the pages of his *Cornhill.* And then he made up his mind to two things. Firstly, to bring his stay at Blore Manor within the smallest possible limits, and secondly, to comport himself while there with such a formal courtesy as should encourage only the barest familiarity.

At Stafford he had to change into another train, which he did, even as he cut his magazine, with characteristic precision and coolness. And so he reached Blore Station about half-past five, still

neat and unsullied, with all the aroma of the street of scents about him.

He let down the window and put out his head. The country thereabouts was flat and uninteresting, the farming untidy, the fences low, yet straggling. A short distance away a few roofs peeping forth from a clump of trees, above which the smoke gently curled, marked the village. The station consisted of a mere shed and a long, bare platform. There were but five persons visible, and of these one was a porter, and one a man servant in a quiet, countrified livery. The latter walked quickly toward him, but was forestalled by three girls, the other occupants of the platform, who, at sight of the stranger, came tearing from the far end of it at a headlong pace.

"Here he is! Here he is!" cried the foremost, her shrill voice drawing a dozen heads to the windows of the train. She owed her success to an extempore tug in the form of an excited bull terrier, which, dragging violently at a strap attached to her wrist, jerked her after him much as if she had been a kettle tied to his tail. She might be anything between twenty and

five-and-twenty—a tiny little creature of almost fairylike proportions. Her color was high and her hair brown; she had curiously opaque brown eyes, bright as well as opaque. Gloves she had none, and her hair was disordered by her struggles with the dog. But, after all, the main impression she made upon Maitland was that she was excessively small. He had no eyes for the others at present. But one, owing to the reckless method of her progression, gave him a dim notion of being all legs.

"You are Mr. Maitland, are you not?" the first comer began volubly, though loss of breath interfered a little with the symmetry of her sentences. "Tom had to attend a meeting of the fox committee at Annerley. I'm Maggie Quaritch, and this is Dubs—I beg your pardon, how silly of me—Joan, I mean, and this is Agnes. Why, child, what have you done with your hat? Pick it up at once! What wild things Mr. Maitland will think us!"

The youngest girl, whose hat was lying upon the platform some distance away, hung her head in a very pretty attitude of shy *gaucherie*. She was about fifteen—

rising sixteen in her brother's phrase—and taller than the elder girls, with a peculiarly pale complexion, greenish-gray eyes, and a mass of brownish-red hair. Her loosely made dress was more in consonance with her style than Maitland, staggering under the shock of such a reception, had time or mind to observe. He formally acknowledged the introductions, but words did not come easily to him. He was dumfounded. He was so unaccustomed to this, or to people like these.

"And we must not forget Bill," resumed Miss Quaritch, if possible, faster than before. "Isn't he a beauty now, Mr. Maitland? Look at his chest, look at his head, look at his eyes. Yes, he lost that one in a fight with Jack Madeley's retriever, and I'm afraid the sight of the other is going, but he's the most beautiful, loveliest, faithfullest dog in the whole world for all that, and his mother loves him, she does!" All in a shrill tone, rising a note perhaps with the final words.

The train was moving out. The last that the twelve faces, still glued to the carriage windows, beheld of the scene was

Miss Quaritch rapturously kissing and hugging the bull terrier, while the Londoner looked on sheepishly. He was horribly conscious of the presence of those grinning faces and suffered as much until the train left as if the onlookers had been a dozen of his club comrades. Whereas the fact was that they found whatever amusement the scene afforded them not in the girl's enthusiasm—she was young enough to gush prettily—but in the strange gentleman's awkward consciousness.

"Now, Mr. Maitland, shall Abiah drive you up in the dog cart, or will you walk with us? Agnes!" this suddenly in a loud scream to the youngest girl, who had moved away, "you can let out the dogs! Down, Juno! Go down, Jack o' Pack! Roy, you ill-conditioned little dog, you are always quarreling! I'm afraid they will make you in a dreadful pickle."

Indeed it seemed to Maitland that they would. An avalanche of scurrying dogs descended upon him from some receptacle where they had been penned. He had a vision of a red Irish setter with soft

brown eyes, not unlike to, but far finer than Miss Maggie's, with its paws momentarily upon the breast of his overcoat; of a couple of wiry fox terriers skirmishing and snarling round his trousers, and of a shy, lop-eared beagle puppy casting miserable glances at them from an outside place. And then the party got under way in some sort of order. At first Maitland had much ado to answer yes and no.

He was still bewildered by these things, crushed, confounded.

He could have groaned as he sedately explained at what time he left Euston, and where he changed. He was conscious that when their attention was not demanded by the pack of dogs, the girls were covertly scrutinizing him; but in his present state of mind, it mattered not a straw to him whether they were calling him a prig, and a "stick," and affected, and supercilious, or were admiring half in scorn the fit of his clothes and boots, and his lordly air. All these remarks were in fact made by some one or other of them before the day was over. But he was, and would have been, supremely indifferent to their criticisms.

The weight of the conversation did not fall heavily upon him: indeed, when Miss Quaritch had a share in it, no one else was overburdened. And from time to time they met upon the road old women or children to whom the girls had always something to say. It was, "Well, Mrs. Marjoram, and so the donkey is better," or, "Now, Johnny, get along home to your mother," or, "How are you, daddy?" in the high-pitched key so trying to the cockney's ear.

In these parleys Joan, the second girl, was foremost. Maitland glanced at her. A young man may be very fastidious, but neck-ribbons awry and brown hair in rich disorder do not entirely close his eyes to a maiden's comeliness. It would be strange if they did, were she such an one as Joan Quaritch. Not tall, yet tall enough, with a full, rounded figure, to which her dress hardly did, hardly could do, justice, she moved with the grace and freedom of perfect health. Her fair complexion could afford to have its clearness marred by a freckle or two, such as hers, mere clots in cream; and if her features were not perfect, yet a nose too straight

and a chin too heavy were more than redeemed by great gray eyes that, sunny or tearful, could be nothing but true—eyes whose frankness and good fellowship aggravated the wounds they inflicted. Why she was called "Dubs" I cannot tell. Perhaps no one can. But, in her good nature and her truth, her simple pride and independence, it suited her.

He had just, to quote the language of this cynic's thoughts, catalogued the last of the Graces, when the party reached the house, which stood some way back from the road. Tom Quaritch had just returned, and welcomed the guest warmly; his mother met Maitland at the drawing-room door. She was a singularly comely woman, stately and somewhat formal. Her greeting so differed from that of her daughters that the visitor found himself speculating upon the extraordinary flightiness of the late Mr. Quaritch. Wherein I doubt not he did him injustice.

At dinner our hero had in some degree recovered himself, and he told them the latest news of the theaters, the clubs, and the book world, and while their ignorance filled him with a wonder he did not hide,

their attention propitiated him. He talked well, and if he was inclined to lord it a little, a shrewd word from Mrs. Quaritch, or a demure glance from Miss Joan's eyes, would lower his didactic tone. The youngest girl promised to be an especial thorn in his side.

"Does everyone in London wear shiny boots in the daytime, Mr. Maitland?" she asked suddenly, *à propos des bottes*, and nothing else.

"A considerable number do, Miss Agnes."

"What sort of people? No, I'm not being rude, mother."

"Well, I hardly know how to answer that. The idle people, perhaps." He smiled indulgently, which aggravated the young lady. She replied, crumbling her bread the while in an absent, meditative way, her eyes innocently fixed on his face:

"Then you are one of the idle people, Mr. Maitland? I don't think I like idle people."

"How singularly unselfish of you, my dear Agnes!" put in Joan vigorously—more vigorously than politely.

Maitland's last reflection as he got into

bed was that he was quite out of place here. These might be very nice people in their way, but not in his way. He must make his visit as short as possible, and forget all about it as quickly as he could. The girls would be insufferable when they came to know him familiarly. Good gracious! fancy young ladies who had never heard of "John Inglesant," or of W. D. Howells' books, and confused the Grosvenor Gallery with the Water Color Exhibition! and read Longfellow! and had but vague ideas of the æsthetic! Miss Joan was pretty too, yes, really pretty, and had fine eyes and a pleasant voice, and fine eyes—yes, fine eyes. And with this thought he fell comfortably asleep.

He came down next morning to find her alone in the breakfast room. A short-skirted beagling costume of scarlet and blue allowed him a glimpse of neat ankles in scarlet hose. She was kneeling before the fire playing with Roy. Her brown wavy hair fell in a heavy loose loop upon her neck, and there was something wonderfully bright and fresh in her whole appearance.

"How quickly you have fallen in with our barbarous ways!" she said with a smile, as she rose. "I did not expect you to be up for hours yet."

"I generally breakfast at nine, and it is nearly that now," he answered, annoyed by some hint of raillery in her tone, and yet unable to conceal a glance of admiration. "I think I must adopt the Blore breakfast hour; it seems, Miss Joan, to agree with you all so well."

"Yes," was the indifferent reply; "we get the first of the three rewards for early rising. The other two we leave for our betters."

And she turned away with a little nod as the others came in. In five minutes a noisy, cheerful breakfast was in progress, and the chances of finding a hare formed the all-engrossing subject of conversation.

On this calm gray morning, warm rather than cold, the little pack, to the great delight of the household, found quickly, and found well. No October leveret was before them, but a good, stout old hare, who gave them a ringing run of two hours, the pleasure of which was not materially diminished when she

baffled them at last in the mysterious way these old hares affect and huntsmen fail to fathom. The visitor performed creditably, though in indifferent training. At Oxford he had been something of a crack, and could still upon occasion forget to keep his boots clean and his clothes intact.

Returning home, Maitland found himself again with Joan. The heat and pleasure of the chase had for the time melted his reserve and thawed his resolution. He talked well and freely to her of a great London hospital over which one of the house surgeons had recently taken him; of the quiet and orderliness of the lone, still wards; of the feeling that came over him there that life was all suffering and death; and how quickly in the bustle of the London streets, where the little world of the hospital seemed distant and unreal, this impression faded away. She listened eagerly, and he, tasting a stealthy and stolen pleasure in seeing how deep and pitiful the gray eyes could grow, prolonged his tale.

"I have enjoyed hearing about it so much," she said gratefully, as they en-

tered the village. And indeed she had passed several people upon the road without a word of greeting. "I hope to be a nurse soon. The dear mother does not think me old enough yet."

"You are going to be a nurse!" he said in tones of such incredulous surprise that the amusement which first appeared in her face changed to annoyance.

"Why not? One does not need a knowledge of art and the newest books for that," she sharply answered.

"Perhaps not," he said feebly. "But after such a life as this, it—the change I mean—would be so complete."

She looked at him, an angry gleam in her eyes, and the color high in her cheeks.

"Do you think, Mr. Maitland, that because we run wild—oh, no, you have not said so—and seem to do nothing but enjoy ourselves, we are incapable of anything beyond hunting and playing tennis, and feeding the dogs and the hens and the chickens? That we cannot have a thought beyond pleasure, or a wish to do good like other people—people in London? That we can never look beyond

Blore—though Blore, I can tell you, would manage ill without some of us!—nor have an aspiration above the kennels and the—and the stables? If you do think so, I trust you are wrong."

He would have answered humbly, but she was gone into the house in huge indignation, leaving our friend strangely uncomfortable. It was just twenty-four hours since his arrival: the opinion of one at least of the madcaps had ceased to be a matter of indifference to him. The change occurred to himself as he mounted the stairs, so that he laughed when alone in his room and resolved to keep away from that girl for the future. How handsome she had looked when she was flying out at him, and how generous seemed her anger even at the time! Somehow the prospect of the four days he had still to spend at Blore was not so depressing as at first. Certainly the vista was shortened by one day, and that may have been the reason.

Meanwhile Maggie, in her sister's bedroom, had much to say of the day's doings. "Didn't he go well? My word! he is not half so stiff as I thought him. I believe

he'd be a very good fellow if he had some of the conceit taken out of him."

"I think he's insufferable," was the chilling answer from Joan; "he considers us savages, and treats us as such."

"He may consider us fit for the Zoo, if he likes; it won't hurt us," quoth Maggie indifferently. With which Joan expressed neither assent nor dissent, but brushed her hair a little faster.

Maitland did not for a moment abandon his fresh resolution. Still he thought he owed it to himself to set the matter right with the young lady before he stiffened anew. As he descended he met her runing up two steps at a time.

"Miss Joan, I am afraid I vexed you just now," he said, with grave humility. "Will you believe it unintentional—stupid, on my part, and grant me your pardon?"

"Oh, dear!" she cried gayly. " We are not used to this here. It is quite King Cophetua and the beggar maid." She dropped him a mock courtesy, and held out her hand in token of amity, when the full signification of what she had said rushed into her mind and flooded her face

with crimson. Without another word or look she fled upstairs, and he heard her door bang behind her.

Mr. Charles Maitland, after this *rencontre*, went down smiling grimly. In the hall he stood for a moment in deep thought; then sagely shook his head several times at a stuffed fox and joined the party in the drawing room.

The next day and the next passed with surprising quickness, as the latter days of a visit always do. In another forty-eight hours Maitland's would be over. Yet singularly enough his spirits did not rise, as he expected they would, at the near prospect of release. As he closed his bedroom door he had a vision of a pair of gray eyes smiling into his, and his palm seemed still to tingle with the touch of a soft, warm hand. He had kept his resolution well—small credit to him. Joan had seemed to avoid him since her unlucky speech upon the stairs; when she did speak to him her words, or more often her tone, stung him, and he smarted under a sense that she repaid with interest the small account in which he was inclined to hold the family generally. He resented

MR. CHARLES MAITLAND, AFTER THIS RENCONTRE, WENT DOWN SMILING GRIMLY.

her veiled contempt with strange bitterness, so that Agnes remarked with her usual candor that he and Joan never spoke to one another save to "jangle." Afterward, walking on the lawn, some line about "sweet bells jangled out of tune," ran in his head. The girl was a vixen, he said to himself, yet he tried to imagine how tender and glorious the great gray eyes, that he only knew as cold or saucy or defiant, could be when their depths were stirred by love. But his imagination failing to satisfy even himself, he went to put on his beagling dress in the worst of humors.

Possibly this made him a trifle reckless, for a promising run ended in ten minutes so far as he was concerned, in a sprained ankle. In jumping over a low fence into a lane his one foot came down sideways on a large stone upon which some pauper had scamped his work, and the mischief was done. The ominous little circle that hunting men know so well soon gathered round him, and he was helped to his feet, or rather foot. Then Agnes fetched the carriage, and he was driven back to Blore. Now, under the circumstances, what could

Mrs. Quaritch, without an *arrière pensée* in the world, do but press him to stay until at least he could put the foot to the ground? Nothing. And what could he do but consent? At any rate, that is what he did.

So he was established in the drawing room, a pretty, cozy room, and told himself it was a terrible nuisance. But, for a cripple confined to a couple of rooms, and surrounded by uncongenial people, without a single new magazine or a word of the world's gossip, he kept up his spirits wonderfully well. The ways of the three girls, and the calm approval of their sedate mother, could not fail to amuse him. Lying there and seeing and hearing many things which would not have come to his knowledge as a mere visitor, he found them not quite what he had judged them to be. He missed Joan one morning, and when with an unconscious fretfulness he inquired the reason, learned that she had been sitting up through the night with an old servant who was ill in the village. He said some word about it to her—very diffidently, for she took his compliments but ill at all times; now she flamed out at

him with twice her ordinary bitterness and disdain, and punished him by taking herself out of the room at once.

"Confound it!" he cried, beating up his pillow fiercely, "I believe the girl hates me."

Did he? and did she?

Then he fell into a fit of musing such as men approaching thirty, who have lived in London, are very apt to indulge in. A club was not everything, be it as good as it might be. And life was not a lounge in Bond Street and Pall Mall, and nothing more. He thought how dull a week spent on his sofa in the Adelphi would have been, even with the newest magazines and the fifth and special *Globes*. In three days was his birthday—his twenty-ninth. And did the girl really hate him? It was a nice name, Joan; Dubs, umph! Dubs? Joan? And so he fell asleep.

How long he slept and whether he carried something of his dreams into his waking he could only guess, but he was aroused by a singular sensation—singular in that, though once familiar enough, it was now as strange to him as the sight of his dead mother's face. If his half-

recalled senses did not deceive him, if he was not still dreaming of Joan, the warm touch of a pair of soft lips was yet lingering upon his forehead, the rustle of a dress very near his ear yet sounded crisply in it. And then someone glided from him, and he heard a hasty exclamation and opened his eyes dreamily. By the screen which concealed the door and sheltered him from its draughts was standing Joan, a-tiptoe, poised as in expectation, something between flight and amusement in her face, her attitude full of unconscious grace. He was still bewildered, and hardly returned from a dreamland even less conventional than Blore. Without as much surprise as if he had thought the matter out—it seemed then almost a natural thing—he said:

"You shall have the gloves, Dubs, with pleasure."

The girl's expression, as he spoke, changed to startled astonishment. She became crimson from her hair to her throat. She stepped toward him, checked herself, then made a quick movement with her hand as if about to say something, and finally covered her face with her hands

and fled from the room. Before he was wide awake he was alone.

At first he smiled pleasantly at the fire, and patted Roy, Joan's terrier, who was lying beside him, curled up snugly in an angle of the sofa. Afterward he became grave and thoughtful, and finally shook his head very much as he had at the stuffed fox in the hall. And so he fidgeted till Roy, who was in a restful mood, retired to the hearthrug.

It would be hard to describe Joan's feelings that afternoon. She was proud, and had begun by resenting for all of them the ill-concealed contempt of Tom's London friend—this man of clubs and chit-chat. She was quite prepared to grant that he was different from them, but not superior. A kind of contempt for the veneer and polish which were his pride was natural to her, and she showed this, not rudely nor coquettishly, but with a hearty sincerity. Still, it is seldom a girl is unaware of admiration, and rare that she does not in secret respect self-assertion in the male creature. This man knew much too, and could tell it well, that was strange and new and delightful to the country

maiden. If he had any heart at all—and since he was from London town she supposed he had not, though she granted him eyes and fine perceptions of the beautiful—she might have, almost, some day, promised herself to like him, had he been of her world—not reflecting that this very fact that he was out of her world formed the charm by which he evoked her interest. As things were, she more than doubted of his heart, and had no doubt at all that between their worlds lay a great, impassable, unbridgeable abyss.

But this afternoon the dislike, which had been fading day by day along with those feelings in another which had caused it, was revived in its old strength upon the matter of the kiss. Alone in her own room the thought made her turn crimson with vexation, and she stamped the floor with annoyance. He had made certain overtures to her—slender and meaningless in all probability. Still, if he could believe her capable after such looks and words as he had used—if after these he thought her capable of this, then indeed, were there no abyss at all, he could be nothing to her. Oh, it was too bad, too

intolerable! She would never forgive him. How indeed could she be anything to him, if she could do such a thing, as dreadful, as unmaidenly to her as to the proudest beauty among his London friends. She told herself again that he was insufferable; and determined to slap Roy well, upon the first opportunity, if that mistaken little pearl of price would persist in favoring the stranger's sofa.

Until this was cleared up she felt her position the very worst in the world, and yet would not for a fortune give him an opportunity of freeing her from it. The very fact that he addressed her with, as it seemed, a greater show of respect, chafed her. Agnes, with a precocious cleverness, a penetration quite her own, kept herself and her dog, Jack o' Pack *alias* Johnny Sprawn, out of her sister's way, and teased her only before company.

But at last Maitland caught Miss Joan unprotected.

"I hope that these are the right size, Miss Joan—they are six and a quarter," he said boldly, yet with, for a person of his disposition and breeding, a strange amount of shamefacedness; producing at

the same time a pair of gloves, Courvoisier's best, many-buttoned, fit for a goddess.

"I beg your pardon?" she said, breathing quickly. But she guessed what he meant.

"Let me get out of your debt."

"Out of my debt, Mr. Maitland?" taking the gloves mechanically.

"Please. Did you think I had forgotten? I should find it hard to do that," he continued, encouraged and relieved by having got rid of the gloves, and inattentive at the moment to her face. Yet she looked long at him searchingly.

"I have found it hard to understand you," she said at last, with repressed anger in voice and eye; "very hard, Mr. Maitland; but I think I do so now. Do you believe that it was I who kissed you when you were asleep on Wednesday afternoon? Can you think so? You force me to presume it is so. Your estimate of my modesty and of your own deserts must differ considerably. I had not the honor. Your gloves"—and she dropped them upon the floor as if the touch contaminated her, the act humiliating the young gentle-

man at least as much as her words—"you had better give to Agnes, if you wish to observe a silly custom. They are due to her, not to me. I thank you, Mr. Maitland, for having compelled me to give this pleasant explanation."

She turned away with a gesture of such queenly contempt that our poor hero—now most unheroic, and dumb as Carlyle would have had his, only with mortification and intense disgust at his stupidity—amazed that he could ever have thought meanly of this girl, "who moved most certainly a goddess," had not a word to express his sorrow. A hero utterly crestfallen! But at the door she looked back, for some strange reason known perchance to female readers. The gloves were on the floor, just beyond his reach—poor, forlorn, sprawling objects, their fingers and palms spread as in ridiculous appeal. As for him, he was lying back on the sofa, in appearance so crushed and helpless that the woman's pity ever near her eyes moved her. She went slowly back, and picked up the gloves, and put them on the table where he could take them.

"Miss Joan," he said, in a tone of per-

sistence that claimed a hearing, and, starting far from the immediate trouble, was apt to arouse curiosity; "we are always, as Agnes says, jangling—on my side, of course, is the false note. Can we not accord better, and be better friends?"

"Not until we learn to know one another better," she said coldly, looking down at him, "or become more discerning judges."

"I was a fool, an idiot, an imbecile!" She nodded gravely, still regarding him from a great height. "I was mad to believe it possible!"

"I think we may be better friends," she responded, smiling faintly, yet with sudden good humor. "We are beginning to know—one another."

"And ourselves," almost under his breath. Then, "Miss Joan, will you ever forgive me? I shall never err again in that direction," he pleaded. "I am humiliated in my own eyes until you tell me it is forgotten."

She nodded, and this time with her own frank smile.

Then she turned away and did leave the room, this time taking Roy with her.

Her joyous laughter and his wild, excited barking proclaimed through the length and breadth of Blore that he was enjoying the rare indulgence of a good romp on the back lawn. It was Roy's day.

And can a dog ever hope for a better day than that upon which his mistress becomes aware that she is also another's mistress: becomes aware that another is thinking of her and for her, nay, that she is the very center of that other's thoughts? What a charming, pleasantly bewildering discovery it is, this learning that for him when she is in the room it is full, and wanting her it is empty, be it never so crowded; that all beside, though they be witty or famous, or what they will, or can or would, are but lay figures, *umbræ*, shadow guests in his estimation. She learns with strange thrills, that in moments of meditation will flash to eye and cheek, that her slightest glance and every change of color, every tone and smile, are marked with jealous care; that pleasure which she does not share is tasteless, and a dinner of herbs, if she be but at a far corner, is a feast for princes. That is her dog's day, or it may be his dog's day. It is a pleas-

ant discovery for a man, *mutatis mutandis;* but for a girl, a sweet, half fearful consciousness, the brightest part of love's young dream—even when the kindred soul is of another world, and an abyss, wide, impassable, unbridgeable lies between.

But these things come to sudden ends sometimes. Sprains, however severe, have an awkward knack of getting well. Swellings subside from inanition, and doctors insist for their credit's sake that the stick or ready arm be relinquished. Certainly a respite or a relapse—call it which you will—is not impossible with care, but it is brief. A singular shooting pain, not easily located with exactness, but somewhere in the neighborhood of the calf, has been found useful; and a strange rigidity of the tendon Achilles in certain positions may gain a day or two. But at last not even these will avail, and the doubly injured one must out and away from among the rose leaves. Twice Maitland fixed his departure for the following morning, and each time when pressed to stay gave way, after so feeble, so ludicrous a resistance, if it deserved

the name, that Agnes scarcely concealed her grimace, and Joan looked another way. She did not add anything to the others' hospitable entreaties. If she guessed what made Maggie's good-night kiss so fervent and clinging, she made no sign and offered no opening.

In the garden next morning, Maitland taxed her with her neutrality. It was wonderful how his sense of humor had become developed at Blore.

"I thought that you did not need so much pressure as to necessitate more than four people's powers of persuasion being used," she answered, in the same playful spirit. "And besides, now you are well enough, must you not leave?"

"Indeed, Miss Joan?"

"And go back to your own way of life? It is a month since you saw the latest telegrams, and there is a French company at the Gaiety, I learn from the *Standard.* We have interests and duties, though you were so hard of belief about them, at Blore, but you have none."

"No interests?"

She shook her head. "No duties, at any rate."

"And so you think," he asked, his eyes fixed upon her changing features, "that I should go back to my old way of life—of a century ago?"

"Of course you must!" But she was not so rude as to tell him what a very foolish question this was. Still it was, was it not?

"So I will, or to something like it, and yet very unlike. But not alone. Joan, will you come with me? If I have known you but a month, I have learned to love your truth and goodness and you, Joan, so that if I go away alone, to return to the old life would be bitterly impossible. You have spoiled that; you must make for me a fresh life in its place. Do you remember you told me that when we knew one another we might be better friends? I have come to know you better, but we cannot be friends. We must be something more, more even than lovers, Joan—husband and wife, if you can like me enough."

It was not an unmanly way of putting it, and he was in earnest. But so quiet, so self-restrained was his manner that it savored of coldness. The girl whose

hand he held while he spoke had no such thought. Her face was turned from him. She was gazing over the wall across the paddock where Maggie's mare was peaceably and audibly feeding, and so at the Blore Ash on its mimic hill, every bough and drooping branchlet dark against the sunset sky; and this radiant in her eyes with a beauty its deepest glow had never held for her before. The sweetest joy was in her heart, and grief in her face. He had been worthy of himself and her love. While he spoke she told herself, not that some time she might love him, but that she had given him all her true heart already. And yet as he was worthy, so she must be worthy and do her part.

"You have done me a great honor," she said at last, drawing away her hand from his grasp, though she did not turn her face, "but it cannot be, Mr. Maitland. I am very grateful to you—I am indeed, and sorry."

"Why can it not be?" he said shortly; startled, I am bound to say, and mortified.

"Because of—of many things. One is that I should not make you happy, nor

you me. I am not suited to your way of life. I am of the country, and I love to be free and unconstrained, while you are of the town. Oh, we should not get on at all! Perhaps you would not be ashamed of me as your wife, but you might be, and I could not endure the chance even of it. There," she added, with a laugh in which a woman's ear might have detected the suppression of a sob, "is one sober reason where none can be needed."

"Is that your only reason?"

She was picking the mortar out of the wall. "Oh, dear me, no! I have a hundred, but that is a sufficient one," she answered almost carelessly, flirting a scrap of lime from the wall with her forefinger.

"And you have been playing with me all this time!" cried he, obtusely enraged by her flippancy.

"Not knowingly, not knowingly, indeed!"

"Can you tell me that you were not aware that I loved you?"

"Well, I thought—the fact is, I thought that you were amusing yourself—in West End fashion."

"Coquette!"

"Mr. Maitland!" she cried vehemently, "how dare you? There is proof, if any were needed, that I am right. You would not have dared to say that to any of your town acquaintances. I am no coquette. If I have given you pain, I am very sorry. And—I beg that we may part friends."

She had begun fiercely, with all her old spirit. He turned away, and she ended with a sudden, anxious, pitiful lameness, that yet, so angry and dull of understanding was he, taught him nothing.

"Friends!" he cried impatiently. "I told you that it was impossible. Oh, Joan, think again! Have I been too hasty? Have I given you no time to weigh it? Have I just offended you in some little thing? Then let me come to you again in three months, after I have been back among my old friends?"

"No, don't do that, Mr. Maitland. It will be of no use and will but give us pain."

"And yet I will come," he replied firmly, endeavoring by the very eager longing of his own gaze to draw from her fair, downcast face some sign of hope. "I

will come, if you forbid me a hundred times. And if you have been playing with me—true, I am in no mood for soft words now—it shall be your punishment to say me nay, again. I shall be here, Joan, to ask you in three months from to-day."

"I cannot prevent you," she said. "Believe me, I shall only have the same answer for you."

"I shall come," he said doggedly, and looked at her with eyes reluctant to quit her drooping lashes lest they should miss some glance bidding his heart take courage. But none came, only the color fluttered uncertainly in her face. So he slowly turned away from her at last and walked across the garden, and out of sight by the gate into the road. He saw nothing of the long, dusty track, and straggling hedges bathed in the last glows of sunset. Those big gray eyes, so frank and true, came again and again between him and the prospect, and blinded his own with a hot mist of sorrow and anger. Ah, Blore, thou wast mightily avenged!

. . . . .

It is a hot afternoon in August, laden

with the hum of dozing life. The sun has driven the less energetic members of the Quaritch family into the cool gloom of the drawing room, where the open windows are shaded by the great cedar. Mrs. Quaritch, upon the sofa, is nodding over a book. Joan, in a low wicker seat, may be doing the same; while Agnes, pursuing a favorite employment upon the hearthrug, is now and again betrayed by a half stifled growl from one or other of the dogs as they rise and turn themselves reproachfully, and flop down again with a sigh in a cool place.

"Agnes," cries her mother, upon some more distinct demonstration of misery being made, "for goodness' sake leave the dogs alone. They have not had a moment's peace since lunch."

"A dog's life isn't peace, mamma," she answers, with the simple air of a discoverer of truth. But, nevertheless, she looks about for fresh worlds to conquer.

"Even Mr. Maitland was better than this," she announces, after a long yawn of discontent, "though he was dull enough. I wonder why he did not come in July. Do you know, Joan?"

"Oh, Agnes, do let us have a moment's peace for once! We are not dogs," cried Joan fretfully.

Wonder! she was always wondering. This very minute, while her eyes were on the page, it was in her mind. Through all those three months passing hour by hour and day by day, she could assure herself that when he had come and gone, she would be at rest again; things would be as before with her. Let him come and go! But when July arrived, and he did not, a sharper pain made itself felt. Bravely as she strove to beat it down, well as she might hide it from others, the certainty that it had needed no second repulse to balk his love sorely hurt her pride. Just her pride, she told herself; nothing else. That he had not stood the test he had himself proposed; that any unacknowledged faintest hope she might have cherished, deep down in her heart, that he might master her by noble persistence, must now be utterly quenched; these things of course had no bitterness for her through the hot August days; had nothing to do with the wearied look that sometimes dulled the gray eyes, nor

with the sudden indifference or as sudden enthusiasms for lawn tennis and dogs and pigeons, that marked her daily moods.

Agnes' teasing, by putting her meditations into words, has disturbed her. She gets up and moves restlessly about, touching this thing and that, and at last leaves the room and stands in the hall, thinking. Here, too, it is dark and cool, and made to seem more so—the door into the garden being open—by the hot glare of sunshine falling upon the spotless doorstep. She glances at this listlessly. The house is still, the servants are at the back; the dogs all worn out by the heat. Then, as she hesitates, a slight crunching of footsteps upon the gravel comes to her ear, breaking the silence. A sudden black shadow falls upon the sunny step and tells of a visitor. Someone chases away his shadow, and steps upon the stone, and raises his gloved hand to the bell. Charles Maitland at last!

Coming straight in from the sunshine he cannot see the swift welcome that springs to eye and cheek, a flash of light and color, quick to come and go. He is too much moved himself to mark how her

hand shakes. He sees no difference in her. But she sees a change in him. She detects some subtle difference that eludes her attempt to define its nature and only fills her with a vague sense that this is not the Charles Maitland from whom she parted.

It is a meeting she has pictured often, but not at all like this. He signs to her to take him into the dining room, the door of which stands open.

"I have come back, Miss Joan."

"Yes?" she answers, sitting down with an attempt to still the tumult within, with such success that she brings herself for the moment nearly to the frame of mind in which they parted, and there is the same weary sufferance in her tone.

"I have come back as I said I would. I have overstepped the three months, but I had a good reason for my delay. Indeed I have been in doubt whether I ought to see you again at all, only I could not bear you to think what you naturally would. I felt that I must see you, even if it cost us both pain." There is a new awkwardness in his tone and pose.

"I told you that it was—quite unneces-

sary—and useless," she answers, with a strange tightening in her throat.

"Then it can do you no harm," he assents quietly. "I have come back not to repeat my petition, but to tell you why I do not and cannot."

"I think," she puts in coldly, "that upon the whole you had better spare yourself the unpleasantness of explaining anything to me. Don't you think so? I asked you for no proof, and held out no hope. Why do you trouble me? Why have you come back?"

"You have not changed!"

For the first time a ring of contempt in her voice takes the place of cold indifference. "I do not change in three months, Mr. Maitland. But there! my mother will wish to see you, and so will Agnes, who is hankering after something to happen. They are in the drawing room."

"But, Miss Joan, grant me one moment! You have not heard my reasons."

"Your reasons! Is it absolutely necessary?" she asks, half fretfully, half scornfully; her uppermost thought an intense desire to be by herself in her own room, with the door safely locked.

"I think so, at any rate. Why, I see! By Jove! of course you must be thinking the worst of me now! Oh, no! if you could not love me, Joan—pray pardon me, I had no right to call you by your name—you need not despise me. I cannot again ask you to be my wife, because," he laughs uneasily, "fortune has put it out of my power to take a wife. My trustee has made ducks and drakes of my property, or rather bulls and bears. I have but a trifle left to begin the world upon, and far too little to marry upon."

"I read of it in the papers. I saw that a Mr. Maitland was the chief sufferer, but I did not connect him with you," she says, in a low voice.

"No, of course not. How should you?" he answers lightly. But nevertheless her coldness is dreadful to him. He had thought she would express some sympathy. And gayly as he talks of it, he feels something of the importance of a ruined man and something of his claim to pity.

"And what are you going to do?"

"Do? We've arranged all that. They

say there is a living to be made at the Bar in New Zealand, if one does not object to riding boots and spurs as part of the professional costume. Of course it will be a different sort of life, and Agnes' favorite patent leathers will be left behind in every sense. This would have been a bad blow to me"—there is a slight catch in his voice, and he gets up, and looks out of one of the windows with his back to her—"now I have learned from you that life should not be all lounging round the table and looking over other people's cards. It has been a sharp lesson, but very opportune as things have turned out. I am ready to take a hand myself now—even without a partner."

He does not at once turn round. He had not fancied she would take it like this, and he listens for a word to tell him that at any rate she is sorry—is grieved as for a stranger. Then he feels a sudden light, timid touch upon his arm. Joan is standing quite close to him, and does not move or take away her hand as he turns. Only she looks down at the floor when she speaks:

"I think I should be better than—than

dummy—if you will take me to New Zealand."

Half laughing, half crying, and wholly confused, she looks up into his astonished face with eyes so brimful of love and tenderness that they tell all her story. For just an instant his eyes meet hers. Then, with a smothered exclamation, he draws her to him—and—in fact smothers the exclamation.

"I am so glad you've lost your money," she sobs, hiding her face, as soon as she can, upon his shoulder. "I should not have done at all—for you—in London, Charley."

There let us leave her. But no, another is less merciful. Neither of them hears the door open or sees Agnes' face appear at it. But she both sees and hears, and says very distinctly and clearly:

"Well!"

But even Agnes is happy and satisfied. Something *has* happened.

THE FATAL LETTER.

HAVE friends who tell me that they seldom walk the streets of London without wondering what is passing behind the house-fronts; without picturing a comedy here, a love-scene there, and behind the dingy cane blinds a something ill-defined, a something odd and *bizarre*. They experience—if you believe them—a sense of loneliness out in the street, an impatience of the sameness of all these many houses, their dull bricks and discreet windows, and a longing that someone would step out and ask them to enter and see the play.

Well, I have never felt any of these things; but as I was passing through Fitzhardinge Square about half-past ten o'clock one evening in last July, after dining, if I remember rightly, in Baker Street, something happened to me which

I fancy may be of interest to such people.

I was passing through the square from north to south, and to avoid a small crowd, which some reception had drawn together, I left the pavement and struck across the road to the path around the oval garden; which, by the way, contains a few of the finest trees in London. This part was in deep shadow, so that when I presently emerged from it and recrossed the road to the pavement near the top of Fitzhardinge Street, I had an advantage over any persons on the pavement. They were under the lamps, while I, coming from beneath the trees, was almost invisible.

The door of the house immediately in front of me as I crossed was open, and an elderly man servant out of livery was standing at it, looking up and down the pavement by turns. It was his air of furtive anxiety that drew my attention to him. He was not like a man looking for a cab, or waiting for his sweetheart; and I had my eye upon him as I stepped upon the pavement before him. But my surprise was great when he uttered a low

exclamation of dismay at sight of me, and made as if he would escape; while his face, in the full glare of the light, grew so pale and terror-stricken that he might before have been completely at his ease. I was astonished and instinctively stood still returning his gaze; for perhaps twenty seconds we remained so, he speechless, and his hands fallen by his side. Then, before I could move on, as I was in the act of doing, he cried, "Oh, Mr. George! Oh! Mr. George!" in a tone that rang out in the stillness rather as a wail than an ordinary cry.

My name, my surname, I mean, is George. For a moment I took the address to myself, forgetting that the man was a stranger, and my heart began to beat more quickly with fear of what might have happened. "What is it?" I exclaimed. "What is it?" and I shook back from the lower part of my face the silk muffler I was wearing. The evening was close, but I had been suffering from a sore throat.

He came nearer and peered more closely at me, and I dismissed my fear; for I thought that I could see the discov-

ery of his mistake dawning upon him. His pallid face, on which the pallor was the more noticeable as his plump features were those of a man with whom the world as a rule went well, regained some of its lost color, and a sigh of relief passed his lips. But this feeling was only momentary. The joy of escape from whatever blow he had thought imminent gave place at once to his previous state of miserable expectancy of something or other.

"You took me for another person," I said, preparing to pass on. At that moment I could have sworn—I would have given one hundred to one twice over—that he was going to say yes. To my intense astonishment, he did not. With a very visible effort he said, "No."

"Eh! What?" I exclaimed. I had taken a step or two.

"No, sir."

"Then what is it?" I said. "What do you want, my good fellow?"

Watching his shuffling, indeterminate manner, I wondered if he were sane. His next answer reassured me on that point. There was an almost desperate deliberation about its manner. "My master

wishes to see you, sir, if you will kindly walk in for five minutes," was what he said.

I should have replied, "Who is your master?" if I had been wise; or cried, "Nonsense!" and gone my way. But the mind, when it is spurred by a sudden emergency, often overruns the more obvious course to adopt a worse. It was possible that one of my intimates had taken the house, and said in his butler's presence that he wished to see me. Thinking of that I answered, "Are you sure of this? Have you not made a mistake, my man?"

With an obstinate sullenness that was new in him, he said, No he had not. Would I please to walk in? He stepped briskly forward as he spake, and induced me by a kind of gentle urgency to enter the house, taking from me, with the ease of a trained servant, my hat, coat, and muffler. Finding himself in the course of his duties he gained more composure; while I, being thus treated, lost my sense of the strangeness of the proceeding, and only awoke to a full consciousness of my position when he had softly shut the door

behind us and was in the act of putting up the chain.

Then I confess I looked round, a little alarmed at my precipitancy. But I found the hall spacious, lofty, and dark-paneled, the ordinary hall of an old London house. The big fireplace was filled with plants in flower. There were rugs on the floor and a number of chairs with painted crests on the backs, and in a corner was an old sedan chair, its poles upright against the wall.

No other servants were visible, it is true. But apart from this all was in order, all was quiet, and any idea of violence was manifestly absurd.

At the same time the affair seemed of the strangest. Why should the butler in charge of a well-arranged and handsome house—the house of an ordinary wealthy gentleman—why should he loiter about the open doorway as if anxious to feel the presence of his kind? Why should he show such nervous excitement and terror as I had witnessed? Why should he introduce a stranger?

I had reached this point when he led the way upstairs. The staircase was

wide, the steps were low and broad. On either side at the head of the flight stood a beautiful Venus of white Parian marble. They were not common reproductions, and I paused. I could see beyond them a Hercules and a Meleager of bronze, and delicately tinted draperies and ottomans that under the light of a silver hanging lamp — a gem from Malta — changed a mere lobby to a fairies' nook. The sight filled me with a certain suspicion; which was dispelled, however, when my hand rested for an instant upon the reddish pedestal that supported one of the statues. The cold touch of the marble was enough for me. The pillars were not of composite; of which they certainly would have consisted in a gaming house, or worse.

Three steps carried me across the lobby to a curtained doorway by which the servant was waiting. I saw that the "shakes" were upon him again. His impatience was so ill concealed that I was not surprised—though I was taken aback—when he dropped the mask altogether, and as I passed him—it being now too late for me to retreat undis-

covered, if the room were occupied—laid a trembling hand upon my arm and thrust his face close to mine. "Ask how he is! Say anything," he whispered, trembling, "no matter what, sir! Only, for the love of Heaven, stay five minutes!"

He gave me a gentle push forward as he spoke—pleasant, all this!—and announced in a loud, quavering voice, "Mr. George!" which was true enough. I found myself walking round a screen at the same time that something in the room, a long, dimly lighted room, fell with a brisk, rattling sound, and there was the scuffling noise of a person, still hidden from me by the screen, rising to his feet in haste.

Next moment I was face to face with two men. One, a handsome elderly gentleman, who wore gray mustaches and would have seemed in place at a service club, was still in his chair, regarding me with a perfectly calm, unmoved face, as if my entrance at that hour were the commonest incident of his life. The other had risen and stood looking at me askance. He was five-and-twenty years

younger than his companion and as good-looking in a different way. But now his face was white and drawn, distorted by the same expression of terror—ay, and a darker and fiercer terror than that which I had already seen upon the servant's features; it was the face of one in a desperate strait. He looked as a man looks who has put all he has in the world upon an outsider—and done it twice. In that quiet drawing room by the side of his placid companion, with nothing whatever in their surroundings to account for his emotion, his panic-stricken face shocked me inexpressibly.

They were in evening dress; and between them was a chess table, its men in disorder: almost touching this was another small table bearing a tray of Apollinaris water and spirits. On this the young man was resting one hand as if, but for its support, he would have fallen.

To add one more fact, I had never seen either of them in my life.

Or wait; could that be true? If so, it must indeed have been a nightmare I was suffering. For the elder man broke

the silence by addressing me in a quiet, ordinary tone that exactly matched his face. "Sit down, George," he said, "don't stand there. I did not expect you this evening." He held out his hand, without rising from his chair, and I advanced and shook it in silence. "I thought you were in Liverpool. How are you?" he continued.

"Very well, I thank you," I muttered mechanically.

"Not very well, I should say," he retorted. "You are as hoarse as a raven. You have a bad cold at best. It is nothing worse, my boy, is it?" with anxiety.

"No, a throat cough; nothing else," I murmured, resigning myself to this astonishing reception—this evident concern for my welfare on the part of a man whom I had never seen in my life.

"That is well!" he answered cheerily. Not only did my presence cause him no surprise. It gave him, without doubt, actual pleasure!

It was otherwise with his companion; grimly and painfully so indeed. He had made no advances to me, spoken no word,

scarcely altered his position. His eyes he had never taken from me. Yet in him there was a change. He had discovered, exactly as had the butler before him, his mistake. The sickly terror was gone from his face, and a half-frightened malevolence, not much more pleasant to witness, had taken its place. Why this did not break out in any active form was part of the general mystery given to me to solve. I could only surmise from glances which he later cast from time to time toward the door, and from the occasional faint creaking of a board in that direction, that his self-restraint had to do with my friend the butler. The inconsequences of dreamland ran through it all: why the elder man remained in error; why the younger with that passion on his face was tongue-tied; why the great house was so still; why the servant should have mixed me up with this business at all — these were questions as unanswerable, one as the other.

And the fog in my mind grew denser when the old gentleman turned from me as if my presence were a usual thing, and

rapped the table before him impatiently. "Now, Gerald!" cried he, in sharp tones, "have you put those pieces back? Good Heavens! I am glad that I have not nerves like yours! Don't you remember the squares, boy? Here, give them to me!" With a hasty gesture of his hand, something like a mesmeric pass over the board, he set down the half dozen pieces with a rapid tap! tap! tap! which made it abundantly clear that he, at any rate, had no doubt of their former positions.

"You will not mind sitting by until we have finished the game?" he continued, speaking to me, and in a voice I fancied more genial than that which he had used to Gerald. "You are anxious to talk to me about your letter, George?" he went on when I did not answer. "The fact is that I have not read the inclosure. Barnes, as usual, read the outer letter to me, in which you said the matter was private and of grave importance; and I intended to go to Laura to-morrow, as you suggested, and get her to read the news to me. Now you have returned so soon, I am glad that I did not trouble her."

"Just so, sir," I said, listening with all my ears; and wondering.

"Well, I hope there is nothing very bad the matter, my boy?" he replied. "However—Gerald! it is your move! ten minutes more of such play as your brother's, and I shall be at your service."

Gerald made a hurried move. The piece rattled upon the board as if he had been playing the castanets. His father made him take it back. I sat watching the two in wonder and silence. What did it all mean? Why should Barnes—doubtless behind the screen, listening—read the outer letter? Why must Laura be employed to read the inner? Why could not this cultivated and refined gentleman before me read his—— Ah! that much was disclosed to me. A mere turn of the hand did it. He had made another of those passes over the board, and I learned from it what an ordinary examination would not have detected. He, the old soldier with the placid face and light-blue eyes, was blind! Quite blind!

I began to see more clearly now, and from this moment I took up, at any rate in my own mind, a different position.

Possibly the servant who had impelled me into the middle of this had had his own good reasons for doing so, as I now began to discern. But with a clew to the labyrinth in my hand, I could no longer move passively at any other's impulse. I must act for myself. For a while I sat still and made no sign. My suspicions were presently confirmed. The elder man more than once scolded his opponent for playing slowly. In one of these intervals he took from an inside pocket of his dress waistcoat a small package.

"You had better take your letter, George," he said. "If there are, as you mentioned, originals in it, they will be more safe with you than with me. You can tell me all about it, *viva voce*, now you are here. Gerald will leave us alone presently."

He held the papers toward me. To take them would be to take an active part in the imposture, and I hesitated, my own hand half outstretched. But my eyes fell at the critical instant upon Master Gerald's face, and my scruples took themselves off. He was eying the packet with an intense greed and a trem-

bling longing—a very itching of the fingers and toes to fall upon the prey—that put an end to my doubts. I rose and took the papers. With a quiet, but I think significant look in his direction, I placed them in the breast pocket of my evening coat. I had no safer receptacle about me, or into that they would have gone.

"Very well, sir," I said, "there is no particular hurry. I think the matter will keep, as things now are, until to-morrow."

"To be sure. You ought not to be out with such a cold at night, my boy," he answered. "You will find a decanter of the Scotch whisky you gave me last Christmas on the tray. Will you have some with hot water and a lemon, George? The servants are all at the theater—Gerald begged a holiday for them—but Barnes will get you the things in a minute."

"Thank you; I won't trouble him. I will take some with cold water," I replied, thinking I should gain in this way what I wanted—time to think; five minutes to myself while they played.

But I was out of my reckoning. "I

will have mine now, too," he said. "Will you mix it, Gerald?"

Gerald jumped up to do it, with tolerable alacrity. I sat still, preferring to help myself when he should have attended to his father, if his father it was. I felt more easy now that I had those papers in my pocket. The more I thought of it the more certain I became that they were the object aimed at by whatever deviltry was on foot, and that possession of them gave me the whip hand. My young gentleman might snarl and show his teeth, but the prize had escaped him.

Perhaps I was a little too confident, a little too contemptuous of my opponent; a little too proud of the firmness with which I had taken at one and the same time the responsibility and the post of vantage. A creak of the board behind the screen roused me from my thoughts. It fell upon my ear trumpet-tongued, a sudden note of warning. I glanced up with a start and a conviction that I was being caught napping, and looked instinctively toward the young man. He was busy at the tray, his back to me. Relieved of my fear of I did not know

what,—perhaps a desperate attack upon my pocket,—I was removing my eyes, when, in doing so, I caught sight of his reflection in a small mirror beyond him. Ah!

What was he busy about? Nothing. Absolutely nothing, at the moment. He was standing motionless,—I could fancy him breathless also,—a strange, listening expression on his face, which seemed to me to have faded to a grayish tinge. His left hand was clasping a half-filled tumbler, the other was at his waistcoat pocket. So he stood during perhaps a second or two, a small lamp upon the tray before him illumining his handsome figure; and then his eyes, glancing up, met the reflection of mine in the mirror. Swiftly as the thought itself could pass from brain to limb, the hand which had been resting in the pocket flashed with a clatter among the glasses; and, turning almost as quickly, he brought one of the latter to the chess table, and set it down unsteadily.

What had I seen? Nothing, actually nothing. Just what Gerald had been doing. Yet my heart was going as many

strokes to the minute as a losing crew. I rose abruptly.

"Wait a moment, sir," I said, as the elder man laid his hand upon the glass. "I don't think that Gerald has mixed this quite as you like it."

He had already lifted it to his lips. I looked from him to Gerald. That young gentleman's color, though he faced me hardily, shifted more than once, and he seemed to be swallowing a succession of oversized fives balls; but his eyes met mine in a vicious kind of smile that was not without its gleam of triumph. I was persuaded that all was right even before his father said so.

"Perhaps you have mixed for me, Gerald?" I suggested pleasantly.

"No!" he answered in sullen defiance. He filled a glass with something—perhaps it was water—and drank it, his back toward me. He had not spoken so much as a single word to me before.

The blind man's ear recognized the tone now. "I wish you boys would agree better," he said wearily. "Gerald, go to bed. I would as soon play chess with an idiot from Earlswood. Generally you can

play the game, if you are good for nothing else; but since your brother came in, you have not made a move which anyone not an imbecile would make. Go to bed, boy! go to bed!"

I had stepped to the table while he was speaking. One of the glasses was full. I lifted it, with seeming unconcern, to my nose. There was whisky in it as well as water. Then *had* Gerald mixed for me? At any rate, I put the tumbler aside, and helped myself afresh. When I set the glass down empty, my mind was made up.

"Gerald does not seem inclined to move, sir, so I will," I said quietly. "I will call in the morning and discuss that matter, if it will suit you. But to-night I feel inclined to get to bed early."

"Quite right, my boy. I would ask you to take a bed here instead of turning out, but I suppose that Laura will be expecting you. Come in any time to-morrow morning. Shall Barnes call a cab for you?"

"I think I will walk," I answered, shaking the proffered hand. "By the way, sir," I added, "have you heard who is the new Home Secretary?"

"Yes, Henry Matthews," he replied. "Gerald told me. He had heard it at the club."

"It is to be hoped that he will have no womanish scruples about capital punishment," I said, as if I were incidentally considering the appointment. And with that last shot at Mr. Gerald—he turned green, I thought, a color which does not go well with a black mustache—I walked out of the room, so peaceful, so cozy, so softly lighted as it looked, I remember, and downstairs. I hoped that I had paralyzed the young fellow, and might leave the house without molestation.

But, as I gained the foot of the stairs, he tapped me on the shoulder. I saw, then, looking at him, that I had mistaken my man. Every trace of the sullen defiance which had marked his manner throughout the interview upstairs was gone. His face was still pale, but it wore a gentle smile as we confronted one another under the hall lamp. "I have not the pleasure of knowing you, but let me thank you for your help," he said in a low voice, yet with a kind of frank spontaneity. "Barnes' idea of bringing you in

"YOU ARE FORGETTING THE PAPERS," HE REMINDED ME.

was a splendid one, and I am immensely obliged to you."

"Don't mention it," I answered stiffly, proceeding with my preparations for going out as if he had not been there, although I must confess that this complete change in him exercised my mind no little.

"I feel so sure that we may rely upon your discretion," he went on, ignoring my tone, "that I need say nothing about that. Of course, we owe you an explanation, but as your cold is really yours and not my brother's, you will not mind if I read you the riddle to-morrow instead of keeping you from your bed to-night?"

"It will do equally well; indeed better," I said, putting on my overcoat and buttoning it carefully across my chest, while I affected to be looking with curiosity at the sedan chair.

He pointed lightly to the place where the packet lay. "You are forgetting the papers," he reminded me. His tone almost compelled the answer: "To be sure."

But I had pretty well made up my mind, and I answered instead: "Not at all. They are quite safe, thank you."

"But you don't—— I beg your pardon," he said, opening his eyes very wide, as if some new light were beginning to shine upon his mind and he could scarcely believe its revelations. "You don't really mean that you are going to take those papers away with you?"

"Certainly!"

"My dear sir!" he remonstrated earnestly. "This is preposterous. Pray forgive me the reminder, but those papers, as my father gave you to understand, are private papers, which he supposed himself to be handing to my brother George."

"Just so," was all I said. And I took a step toward the door.

"You really mean to take them?" he asked seriously.

"I do; unless you can satisfactorily explain the part I have played this evening, and also make it clear to me that you have a right to the possession of the papers."

"Confound it! If I must do so to-night, I must!" he said reluctantly. "I trust to your honor, sir, to keep the explanation secret." I bowed, and he re-

sumed: "My elder brother and I are in business together. Lately we have had losses which have crippled us so severely that we decided to disclose them to Sir Charles and ask his help. George did so yesterday by letter, giving certain notes of our liabilities. You ask why he did not make such a statement by word of mouth? Because he had to go to Liverpool at a moment's notice to make a last effort to arrange the matter. And as for me," with a curious grimace, "my father would as soon discuss business with his dog! Sooner!"

"Well?" I said. He had paused, and was absently flicking the blossoms off the geraniums in the fireplace with his pocket handkerchief, looking moodily at his work the while. I cannot remember noticing the handkerchief, yet I seem to be able to see it now. It had a red border, and was heavily scented with white rose. "Well?"

"Well," he continued, with a visible effort, "my father has been ailing lately, and this morning his usual doctor made him see Bristowe. He is an authority on heart disease, as you doubtless know;

and his opinion is," he added, in a lower voice and with some emotion, "that even a slight shock may prove fatal."

I began to feel hot and uncomfortable. What was I to think? The packet was becoming as lead in my pocket.

"Of course," he resumed more briskly, "that threw our difficulties into the shade at once; and my first impulse was to get these papers from him. Don't you see that? All day I have been trying in vain to effect it. I took Barnes, who is an old servant, partially into my confidence, but we could think of no plan. My father, like many people who have lost their sight, is jealous, and I was at my wits' end, when Barnes brought you up. Your likeness," he added in a parenthesis, looking at me reflectively, "to George put the idea into his head, I fancy? Yes, it must have been so. When I heard you announced, for a moment I thought that you were George."

"And you called up a look of the warmest welcome," I put in dryly.

He colored, but answered almost immediately, "I was afraid that he would assume that the governor had read his

letter, and blurt out something about it. Good Lord! if you knew the funk in which I have been all the evening lest my father should ask either of us to read the letter!" and he gathered up his handkerchief with a sigh of relief, and wiped his forehead.

"I could see it very plainly," I answered, going slowly in my mind over what he had told me. If the truth must be confessed, I was in no slight quandary what I should do, or what I should believe. Was this really the key to it all? Dared I doubt it? or that that which I had constructed was a mare's nest—the mere framework of a mare's nest. For the life of me I could not tell!

"Well?" he said presently, looking up with an offended air. "Is there anything else I can explain? or will you have the kindness to return my property to me now?"

"There is one thing, about which I should like to ask a question," I said.

"Ask on!" he replied; and I wondered whether there was not a little too much of bravado in the tone of sufferance he assumed.

"Why do you carry"—I went on,

raising my eyes to his, and pausing on the word an instant—"that little medicament—you know what I mean—in your waistcoat pocket, my friend?"

He perceptibly flinched. "I don't quite—quite understand," he began to stammer. Then he changed his tone and went on rapidly, "No! I will be frank with you, Mr.—Mr.——"

"George," I said calmly.

"Ah, indeed?" a trifle surprised, "Mr. George! Well, it is something Bristowe gave me this morning to be administered to my father—without his knowledge, if possible—whenever he grows excited. I did not think that you had seen it."

Nor had I. I had only inferred its presence. But having inferred rightly once, I was inclined to trust my inference farther. Moreover, while he gave this explanation, his breath came and went so quickly that my former suspicions returned. I was ready for him when he said, "Now I will trouble you, if you please, for those papers?" and held out his hand.

"I cannot give them to you," I replied, point-blank.

"You cannot give them to me now?" he repeated.

"No. Moreover, the packet is sealed. I do not see, on second thoughts, what harm I can do you—now that it is out of your father's hands—by keeping it until to-morrow, when I will return it to your brother, from whom it came."

"He will not be in London," he answered doggedly. He stepped between me and the door with looks which I did not like. At the same time I felt that some allowance must be made for a man treated in this way.

"I am sorry," I said, "but I cannot do what you ask. I will do this, however. If you think the delay of importance, and will give me your brother's address in Liverpool, I will undertake to post the letters to him at once."

He considered the offer, eying me the while with the same disfavor which he had exhibited in the drawing room. At last he said slowly, "If you will do that?"

"I will," I repeated. "I will do it immediately."

He gave me the direction—"George

Ritherdon, at the London and North-western Hotel, Liverpool"—and in return I gave him my own name and address. Then I parted from him, with a civil good-night on either side—and little liking, I fancy—the clocks striking midnight, and the servants coming in as I passed out into the cool darkness of the square.

Late as it was I went straight to my club, determined that, as I had assumed the responsibility, there should be no laches on my part. There I placed the packet, together with a short note explaining how it came into my possession, in an outer envelope, and dropped the whole, duly directed and stamped, into the nearest pillar box. I could not register it at that hour, and rather than wait until next morning, I omitted the precaution; merely requesting Mr. Ritherdon to acknowledge its receipt.

Well, some days passed; during which it may be imagined that I thought no little about my odd experience. It was the story of the Lady and the Tiger over again. I had the choice of two alternatives at least. I might either believe the young fellow's story, which certainly

had the merit of explaining in a fairly probable manner an occurrence of so odd a character as not to lend itself freely to explanation. Or I might disbelieve his story, plausible in its very strangeness as it was, in favor of my own vague suspicions. Which was I to do?

Well, I set out by preferring the former alternative. This, notwithstanding that I had to some extent committed myself against it by withholding the papers. But with each day that passed without bringing me an answer from Liverpool, I leaned more and more to the other side. I began to pin my faith to the Tiger, adding each morning a point to the odds in the animal's favor. So it went on until ten days had passed.

Then a little out of curiosity, but more, I gravely declare, because I thought it the right thing to do, I resolved to seek out George Ritherdon. I had no difficulty in learning where he might be found. I turned up the firm of Ritherdon Brothers (George and Gerald), cotton-spinners and India merchants, in the first directory I consulted. And about noon the next day I called at their place of business, and

sent in my card to the senior partner. I waited five minutes—curiously scanned by the porter, who no doubt saw a likeness between me and his employer—and then I was admitted to the latter's room.

He was a tall man with a fair beard, not one whit like Gerald, and yet tolerably good looking; if I say more I shall seem to be describing myself. I fancied him to be balder about the temples, however, and grayer and more careworn than the man I am in the habit of seeing in my shaving glass. His eyes, too, had a hard look, and he seemed in ill health. All these things I took in later. At the time I only noticed his clothes. "So the old gentleman is dead," I thought, "and the young one's tale is true, after all?" George Ritherdon was in deep mourning.

"I wrote to you," I began, taking the seat to which he pointed, "about a fortnight ago."

He looked at my card, which he held in his hand. "I think not," he said slowly.

"Yes," I repeated. "You were then at the London and Northwestern Hotel, at Liverpool."

He was stepping to his writing table, but he stopped abruptly. "I was in Liverpool," he answered, in a different tone, "but I was not at that hotel. You are thinking of my brother, are you not?"

"No," I said. "It was your brother who told me you were there."

"Perhaps you had better explain what was the subject of your letter," he suggested, speaking in the weary tone of one returning to a painful matter. "I have been through a great trouble lately, and this may well have been overlooked."

I said I would, and as briefly as possible I told the main facts of my strange visit in Fitzhardinge Square. He was much moved, walking up and down the room as he listened, and giving vent to exclamations from time to time, until I came to the arrangement I had finally made with his brother. Then he raised his hand as one might do in pain.

"Enough!" he said abruptly. "Barnes told me a rambling tale of some stranger. I understand it all now."

"So do I, I think!" I replied dryly. "Your brother went to Liverpool, and received the papers in your name?"

He murmured what I took for "Yes." But he did not utter a single word of acknowledgment to me, or of reprobation of his brother's deceit. I thought some such word should have been spoken; and I let my feelings carry me away. "Let me tell you," I said warmly, "that your brother is a——"

"Hush!" he said, holding up his hand again. "He is dead."

"Dead!" I repeated, shocked and amazed.

"Have you not read of it in the papers? It is in all the papers," he said wearily. "He committed suicide—God forgive me for it!—at Liverpool, at the hotel you have mentioned, and the day after you saw him."

And so it was. He had committed some serious forgery—he had always been wild, though his father, slow to see it, had only lately closed his purse to him—and the forged signatures had come into his brother's power. He had cheated his brother before. There had long been bad blood between them; the one being as cold, businesslike, and masterful as the other was idle and jealous.

"I told him," the elder said to me, shading his eyes with his hand, "that I should let him be prosecuted—that I would not protect or shelter him. The threat nearly drove him mad; and while it was hanging over him, I wrote to disclose the matter to Sir Charles. Gerald thought his last chance lay in recovering this letter unread. The proofs against him destroyed, he might laugh at me. His first attempts failed; and then he planned, with Barnes' cognizance, to get possession of the packet by drugging my father's whisky. Barnes' courage deserted him; he called you in, and—and you know the rest."

"But," I said softly, "your brother did get the letter—at Liverpool."

George Ritherdon groaned. "Yes," he said, "he did. But the proofs were not inclosed. After writing the outside letter I changed my mind, and withheld them, explaining my reasons within. He found his plot laid in vain; and it was under the shock of this disappointment—the packet lay before him, resealed and directed to me—that he—that he did it. Poor Gerald!"

"Poor Gerald!" I said. What else remained to be said?

It may be a survival of superstition, yet, when I dine in' Baker Street now, I take some care to go home by any other route than that through Fitzhardinge Square.

THE END.

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